Who holds the key to my heart?

Who holds the key to my *heart*

A LOVE STORY BY

LITTEZ KOERIES

Copyright © 2023 Littez Koeries

First edition 2023

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or any information storage or retrieval system without permission from the copyright holder.

The Author has made every effort to trace and acknowledge sources/resources/individuals. In the event that any images/information have been incorrectly attributed or credited, the Author will be pleased to rectify these omissions at the earliest opportunity.

ISBN 978-1-77636-389-6

Published by Littez Koeries using Reach Publishers' services,
P O Box 1384, Wandsbeck, South Africa, 3631

Edited by Jane Goodfellow for Reach Publishers
Cover designed by Reach Publishers
Website: www.reachpublishers.org
E-mail: reach@reachpublish.co.za

Littez Koeries
littez.sampson@gmail.com

Who holds the key to my heart?

Thank you to Ms Edna Nelson for your mentorship, answering all my questions, guiding me through this process and simply just putting up with me. You have been a rock star!

Thank you, Reach Publishers, for your hard work and dedication to helping me get my book out there and for guiding me throughout this process. You guys have all been amazing. Thank you to my mum and dad for always supporting me, for trusting in my risks and never doubting me. To my baby sister, you are my strength; thank you for the faith you have in me and for the kind words you shared with me throughout this process. To my big brother, thank you for always being there. I love you all.

Limaan, Milaan and Kiaan - I hope that you will be proud of this one day. Strive for what you believe in. I love the three of you with every part of me.

Dedications

To my handsome husband. Thank you for giving me a story to write about. Life with you has always been an adventure. I love you, Mr RPK.

And Chapter 21 is dedicated to an amazing person in my life. I love you forever. R.I.P - 11 May 2010

CHAPTER 1

ROMEO'S POV:

I hear a woman's voice as she whispers, "What are we going to do with him?" and then I hear a male voice and he says, "We just want his father to pay." I knew it, I knew this was about my father. I hear a second male voice saying, "We're here," and the car suddenly stops. I hear the car doors and then everything is awfully quiet. It's getting cold, I can feel the chill in the air, which means it is late at night, and brusquely, I get pulled from the car, and because my arms are tied behind my back and I am blindfolded, it feels like I am on a rollercoaster and not in control of what is happening to me. The woman is screaming as I feel a blow to my ribs and face; all I can taste is blood. Someone pulls off my blindfold and it takes my eyes a minute to descend back into focus. I see a tall, really ugly dude, and the other man and woman who are well dressed, and they look decent. This is a match from hell.

Scarface: "Where were you the day Jessica was killed?"
Romeo: "With your mother." He kicks me again and I cough up some blood, the taste is nauseating.
Scarface: "You paid me to take him, here he is, so where is my money?"
Mr Smith: "In the trunk, take it and you can leave."
Scarface: "You can thank your lucky stars I didn't kill you."
Romeo: "You can thank your lucky stars my hands are tied."
Mr Smith: "Smart mouth you have on you there, son, you better watch it."

Scarface: "Take my advice, Wayne and shoot this kid, he will run his mouth."

Mr Smith: "Just leave, Scar, I will handle this." *This is turning out to be a nightmare, I need to give the instruction and end this as quickly as it started,* he thinks.

Scarface kicks me again and then he takes his bags of money and gets into the car and leaves. I only see the abandoned warehouse now and they drag me into it. I am so hungry. I look at this elderly lady and ask her for something to eat, maybe she will have some mercy. "Hey, sexy, got some food?" She just looks at me, and then Mr Smith pushes me onto a chair. A few minutes later, Mrs Smith comes back with those kid-like meals, she feeds me star-shaped nuggets and some fries. I am starving, so I eat it. She wipes some of the blood off my face and I look at her in her eyes and I can see her sadness, so I do what I never expected to do, and she probably didn't expect it either - I apologise. "Mrs Smith, I am sorry for what happened to Jessica, she didn't deserve to die." She thanks me and I am so tired, I am exhausted, and I ask her to tell me where I am. "Am I still in the same country?" she assures me that I am, and all they are asking is for me to make a video so they could send it to my father.

I sit there and think back to when I was a kid; kids make mistakes you know, we get into trouble, we get grounded. My dad was strict and hard on us, Dillan and me at least. He would take away our gadgets, and he wouldn't allow us outside or to even have any friends. I don't have honest communication with my family; they try but I am at fault, I keep my distance and try to just do what's right and live by their rules. Don't get me wrong, I love my parents and my brother but if I make it out of this alive, I need to make some changes to my lifestyle.

Mr Smith wakes me and says they are ready, there are lights and a camera, and it is all well set up. I look up and see my reflection. My face is black, blue, and purple and there is still some blood on it. My hands are tied, and I am sore and tired, but I try to do this for them.

"Dad, as you can see, I am alive. The people who took me want money, your money. They need you to deliver the money, alone, no cops! Follow their

instructions and they won't hurt me. Here are the details," and I tell them what I was instructed to say.

They end the video and before I pass out, either from the pain or just exhaustion, I think of Lilly.

10 YEARS AGO.....

She was running around, playing in the garden, and waiting for her parents. At nine years old, Lilly didn't expect that this would be the day she made a new friend. On their way to the church, she found herself singing and staring out of the window, staring at the scenery, this day was special, she could feel it.

She looked at her mum and smiled as they pulled up at the church house. They were walking hand in hand towards the entrance when she suddenly heard a car approaching, and her mum stopped and turned around to greet the new guest. Her mum hugged the lady, and they seemed friendly. *Does mummy know these people?* she wondered. Lilly waited at the door and watched as the pleasantries unfolded.

There was an elderly lady, Mrs Lisa Kale, her husband Mr Edward Kale, and two young boys, Romeo, and Dillan.

Lilly's mum Kate and her father Wesley quickly became friends with Aunty Lisa and Uncle Edward. They sat together in the service and afterwards Kate invited Lisa and her family for lunch at their home. Lilly was extremely excited as, from what she could tell, Dillan was almost her age, and Romeo was the same age as Lilly's older brother William.

Lilly also had a baby sister Marsha and she was just a baby, so everyone was fond of Marsha. Everyone loves babies, although Lilly wasn't a fan of Marsha's. *Baby sisters are so annoying*, she thought.

At the home of Lilly and her family, they sat down for lunch and enjoyed the afternoon; Lilly and Dillan got along very well and they also quickly became friends. While Lilly, Dillan, William, and Romeo played outside there was a sudden loud crash, and everyone froze. "What just happened?" Romeo looked at William with large eyes. "That was definitely a car crash," William said, and at that moment all four parents came running down the driveway. Kate screamed, "Wes, call for help!" as she reached their front gate; she saw something, a body. "Oh my God," she screamed; there seemed to be a young lady lying on the side of the road. As she approached, the young lady lay still, with no movement, no breathing…. Lilly thought she was dead, she had to be dead. Why wasn't she moving?

Lilly: "Mama, why is she not moving?"
Kate: "William, take all the kids back inside," she ordered her son.

Will stood frozen, he was in shock. He couldn't move, he just kept staring at the lifeless body.

Edward: "Romeo, take them inside! Now!!" Uncle Edward shouted.
Romeo: "Yes, Dad. Come on guys, let's go inside." He ushered all the kids, but Lilly stood, shocked, scared, and unable to move. He gently took her hand and before he could say anything, they both jumped back as they felt an electric shock pass between them. She looked up at him and he said, "Let's go inside, Lilly."

The police and ambulance arrived as they walked inside. They sat and waited, wondering if the lady was hurt, if she had survived, and if she had, who was she?

CHAPTER 2

Kate POV

I can't believe she's dead, such a young soul. Life is so unpredictable. We had visitors over for lunch and this is what happens right outside my home; oh, I hope they don't think this is what the neighbourhood is like. We live in an upper-class community and it is normally very safe, and access is restricted in this area. I wonder how or why she ended up here? I wonder who she was? The police wouldn't tell us anything as we aren't family; at least they found the details of someone to contact in her purse. This turned out to be an incredibly sad afternoon. It was strange how Edward seemed to react around this whole incident. Wesley and I both saw how weirdly he looked at her lifeless body, but then this is not something you see every day.

Wes POV

My family is so shaken, it seemed the young lady from the accident was running from something because she had bags and boxes in her car, or at least that's what our security guy said. I hope they get to the bottom of this. The officer shared that she was some famous actors' daughter; this is what money does when you don't know how to work with it. Poor family.

It was nice meeting the Kale Family yesterday, that Edward Kale is a strange man. They have more money than sense. He kept talking about his possessions and

assets, but at least they don't have more money than I do, I am rich, if I do say so myself.

Lilly's POV

Dillan is really friendly. I like having new friends. We all were so sad about the lady, Mummy said she died. It was a really scary moment. Romeo touched my hand and shocked my fingers, jeez that was weird. He has such big eyes, and he is almost as strong as my brother. I heard Aunty Lisa saying that we have to visit them next week. That will be fun.

Edward's POV

I had an amazing lunch, I sure wish Lisa would get some cooking tips from Kate, she made a wonderful meal. That is one rich family, although I have much more money than Wes. I am pacing and trying to take my mind off things; I need to sit down. *Breathe Ed, breathe*, maybe if I repeat this mantra to myself, I will calm down. What was she thinking? What was she doing in that area? How did she know*? Calm down Ed*, I tell myself again. I hope no one noticed my reaction. SHIT!

CHAPTER 3

5 YEARS LATER

ROMEO'S POV

Its Lilly's birthday today and my dad insists that we go. She is fourteen years old today and we have found her a gift, it took hours, and it was annoying. My mum insists that we don't show up emptyhanded. We haven't seen them in almost a year now, I don't know why we need to go. I also have to cancel my date with my girlfriend to attend a fourteen-year-old girl's party; this is embarrassing, maybe I can ask my mum if I could stay. Why didn't I think about this sooner?

Romeo: "Mum, I'm supposed to be with Amy today, can I just stay home? We haven't been to their house in over a year, doesn't it feel weird to just show up now? Why did they invite us all of a sudden?" I realise I am rambling.

Lisa (Romeo's mum): "No, Romeo, you can't stay at home, we are going and that's final, please don't nag."

Romeo: **"**Lilly is not my friend. Please, Mum?"

Lisa: **"**We are going as a family, Romeo; you always nag not to go places, but when we get there, you have such a good time."

Romeo: "Fine!" I am like a fourteen-year-old myself, I stomp off and put on my jeans and a muscle top. Gym has paid off; my arms are in shape and my six pack is almost showing.

Kate (Lilly's mum): "Lilly, the Kale family will be here later, you still have a few hours with your friends, but you need to spend time with Romeo and Dillan and introduce them to your friends. You guys can have the pool house for your sleepover, and William is in charge, understood? So, enjoy your afternoon with the girls and I will come and check on you guys later."

Lilly: "Mum, you don't need to check on us, Dad will be preparing the food right above us so we will be okay. I will come up later to fetch 'our guest', but no old people outside please."

Kate: "Who are you calling old?"

Lilly: "You know what I mean."

Kate: That child is going to send me to an early grave. She is wearing a bikini, and her walking around like that makes me nervous, but she is noticeably confident and strong-willed. I hope she is smart too. Teenagers are so easily pressured to do certain things; it's not how it used to be in our days. She is at the right age where boys will take advantage of her, and her body sure has developed over the last six months. I am proud of her, don't get me wrong, I just hope she is careful and makes good choices. I shake my head and finish making the salad when the phone rings and it is the caterer.

Lisa's POV

Oh, I hope Kate doesn't mind us showing up so early, I am on an edge today. Dillan is complaining he is tired, so we decide to let him rest in a guest room when we get to Simon's, he has been up studying all night. We arrive, knock, and she answers the door. "Hi Kate, I hope you don't mind that we came so early, I just thought you might need help. I know what it's like to host teenage parties. Here, I made a salad, and we brought some wine." She welcomes us in.

Kate: "Romeo, can you find William and Lilly for me, please?"

Romeo: "Sure, Aunt Kate."

Aunty Kate sent me to look for her own kids in this enormous house. William's room is next to the guest room that Dillan went into a few minutes ago - see, William is napping too. I don't understand what I am supposed to be doing here. Now where is Lilly's room? I stand and look around; I think it is this one…. the door is pink, so duh! "Oh, hi!" I didn't knock. Shit! What…. the…. Hell…. is she wearing? I stand there with my mouth open.

Romeo: "Hmmm, I apologise, I should have knocked."

Lilly: "Hi, it's okay" …. shit, where is my towel? We just stand there looking at each other."

Romeo: "Your mum is looking for you."

Lilly: "Sure, I will be right there."

Romeo: *Stop staring and leave the room,* I tell myself. I can't peel my eyes away from her.

Lilly: Wow, he's really checking me out. I fiddle with my fingers. Why am I so nervous?

Romeo: I clear my throat. "Before I go, can I just say something?"

Lilly: "Sure, what's up?"

Romeo: "You should change, that bikini is way too revealing." And with that I close her bedroom door. Wow, she sure has changed, I have never seen a body like that on a fourteen-year-old. That can't be the same snotnose kid? I shake my head and walk off, I need to get my shit together, she's a kid. This is going to be a long day.

Lilly's POV

My gosh, who the hell does he think he is? Did he really just ask me to change? I turn around and look at myself in the mirror. *I am perfect, what's his problem?* I shake my head and I can't wait for Tessa and Lee, my best friends, to get here. I roll my eyes and think about the fun we are about to have. I only invited my two best friends, Tessa and Lee. They are the only two friends I want here. My brother always had a crush on Lee; he tries not to show it and I think she has a crush on him too. So maybe Dillan, William and Romeo will join us. I idly wonder what Romeo's problem is but decide not to give him another thought. We will have a fun time. My friends have arrived. Let's get this party started. Yah!!

"Hi Ladies, get changed into your bathing suits and let's head to the pool. I want you to meet some friends of mine." Tessa, always the slow one, takes almost an hour just to get changed into a bathing suit, while Lee and I sit and wait for her and giggle about our swimsuits. When Tessa is done, we head downstairs, and I introduce my friends to the Kale brothers.

Romeo's POV

I can't take my eyes off Lilly; she is in the pool with her friends. *Why hasn't she changed that damn swimsuit?* I need to keep my cool. I'm acting like a horny teenager, and I consider myself a man now. I have just turned eighteen, so I am grown. "Great view, isn't it, Son?" I hear my dad's voice, and shit - I have just been caught staring at and eyeballing Lilly. "Hi Dad, I was just watching the water," I try to lie but he raises an eyebrow at me, and I know he doesn't believe me.

I overhear my mum telling Aunt Kate about Amy and I almost ask who Amy is and then remember that she is my girlfriend, who I have been dating for almost two years. I am completely in a daze when Dillan throws a football at me, and it knocks my drink over. I look at him and he's laughing so hard, he's actually coughing, William is laughing too, and I just smile and now I have to take my shirt off. I catch Lilly and her friends looking at me and giggling and this makes

me blush. *Shit, what Is happening to me?* I have to pull it together, so I continue to help my dad with the barbeque and try to act normal.

It's almost 10:00pm and we are all huddled around the fire. Our parents are inside in the main house and we are just relaxing and talking outside in the pool house. Lilly is really funny, and she and Dillan are good friends. They make silly jokes, and they have a good understanding. Lee, Lilly's friend, asked William to take her home, so it's just the four of us. We decided to make a hubbly, and we are smoking and hiding from our parents, they hate the hubbly. Suddenly we hear the sirens… "Is that the police?" Lilly looks at me and we both start heading inside while the sirens are actually getting louder. As we approach the front gate, the police are surrounding the property and they are looking for my dad. That's weird, how did they know we were here and what do they want from him?

Lilly's dad comes out and tells the officer in charge that my dad is his guest and asks them what this is about; the officer then says something no one expected. "Mr Kale is under arrest for the murder of Jessica Smith."

Wait, isn't that the lady who died in the car crash five years ago?

CHAPTER 4

Lisa's POV

The police have been questioning my husband about a letter they found in the girl's bedroom about a month ago; my question is why has this taken so long? She died five years ago. I am in the waiting area and our lawyer is with Edward, so I am not that worried, we pay him enough to get Eddy off the hook. I am so confused, and I wonder what the letter says. I hear a noise, breaking my thoughts, and our lawyer appears.

"Mrs Kale, I have some news, I don't know how to say this, but the letter, hmmm…maybe you should read it."

"Oh, for goodness' sake, just give it here, Jake." He passes me the letter with hesitation, and this makes me nervous, of course it's a copy, the original is in evidence.

Dear Edward

Love of my life, you are the first thing I think of when I wake up and I'm looking forward to a life where I will wake up next to you, not needing to imagine you, because you will be sleeping right there next to me. I want to spend the rest of my life sleeping next to you and I can't imagine it otherwise. I can't wait for you to leave Lisa; you promised you would.

You are the love of my life. You're the only person in the entire world who can lift my spirits when I'm sad by giving me one single hug that means the world to me. You're the only one I think of 24/7 - when I wake up, when I go to sleep, and every second in between.

My Pudding, I am the happiest woman alive because I have you.

There wouldn't be a 'me' without you or a 'you' without me. We were meant to watch the sunrise in the morning together, for the rest of our lives.

We were meant to be there for each other, to fight for our love, and never stop fighting no matter what. I love you! Don't leave me. We will last forever. I know that you are much older than me and my dad is your friend, but we will make this work.

Love forever

Jessica

My mouth must be on the floor, open in disbelief, because Jake looks at me and asks me if I knew or had any idea. "I didn't know," I whisper as tears pool in my eyes. What the hell? This can't be happening. Jake interrupts my thoughts. "Mrs Kale, they are asking for a twenty-five-thousand-rand bail." I sit down, take my card, and tell him to make the payment. Something is just not okay; I need to get Edward home so he can explain himself. After what feels like an hour and signing almost a thousand pages, I see him. He looks down, he can't even face me; as he approaches, I see the look I have known for many years - guilt!

I must admit, I am not really that surprised. I somehow expected this. We drive home in silence. The boys have stayed over at Kate's place, thank God. We don't need them around now. He doesn't say a word. We get home and we head to our bedroom. He turns and stares at me for what seems to be an eternity and eventually, a sound escapes him. He sobs, I mean full-on crying. I have never seen him like this.

Edward: "I am so sorry, Lisa."

Lisa: "She calls you Pudding?" That's about all I could manage. I stand at the side of the bed.

Edward: "It was a mistake…. I never loved her. It didn't mean anything."

Lisa: "Isn't it always a mistake? You never loved her. Is that all you can say?" I am now screaming. I am angry, why does he always do this? Am I not enough?

Edward: "Oh shut up, Lisa, I try to apologise then you start this shit. I said I was sorry!"

He stands up straight and clears his throat and wipes away his tears.

Lisa: "You were crying like a baby five seconds ago. She was just a kid?" His face and stature has completely changed and it's like he has nine thousand different personalities.

Edward: "Jessica was twenty-five, an adult, I didn't do anything wrong."

Lisa: "Edward, you are almost forty years old, aren't you ashamed?"

I stand there like a fool, and he doesn't answer me, he gives me a cold stare and I don't know why or what happened, but I feel nauseous, and the next thing I remember is Edward running towards me.

Edward's POV

Lisa is always so dramatic. I am tired and sweaty, and I sat in a police station for over five hours. Now we are on our way to the emergency room. We get there and they take her to a small room and ask me to wait outside. I am not good at waiting. I know she is fine; we have been married for seventeen years, I know her. I look at my watch and its almost midnight. I need sleep, maybe I should get a coffee. As I turn to leave, I hear the doctor calling after me and asking me to join them. Thank God. It's only been thirty minutes, but I feel like it's been hours. I walk into her room, and I am so annoyed. She is sitting up with her head in her hands and says, "Doctor, may I please just go home?" I look from Lisa to the doctor, and I ask what is going on, but the doctor looks to Lisa, almost trying her to encourage her to tell me what is wrong with her. This is making me nervous. She looks at me and says she had a temporary drop in her blood pressure, but the doctor wants to keep her in and run some tests.

Sudden fear grips my chest and I feel like I can't breathe. I ask the doctor some questions and he spends the next fifteen minutes trying to calm me down. I don't want to lose my wife.

The room is spinning and I can't breathe, my heart is pounding in my chest. I feel even more sweaty, and try to sit down, but I can't even see a chair, so I start pacing until the doctor clears his throat. I suddenly snap out of my minor panic attack. He tries to assure me that everything will be okay and I do my best to remain calm.

"Let us get you admitted and run some tests," he says to Lisa. I almost faint but I remember my comment about Lisa being dramatic, so I shake my head and take a deep breath. They admit her and I stay with her, and I close my eyes and vow to never be unfaithful again. I love my wife and I pray she will forgive me. I will do anything to make things right with this woman. We sit for hours talking; we have decided not to tell the boys until we know what is actually wrong with her. The sun has risen, and she is now fast asleep. What a day.

Lilly's POV

It's storming outside and we decide to have a sleepover. Weirdest thing ever, Lee and William came back here together, I thought he was walking her home. Anyway, we are sitting while the boys are pumping up the blow-up beds. William made a fire and it's nice and cozy. We have already planned the sleeping arrangement. I will sleep on the end, followed by Tessa, Lee, then William, no surprise there, and then Dillan and Romeo on the other end. No one has complained so we get ready for bed as it is almost 2am and I am exhausted. After an hour, everyone is fast asleep, and I realise I need the loo. Great, I hate getting up alone, but I act brave and do my business.

Upon my return, it's dark and I try not to step on anyone. I slowly get back in bed and I try and snuggle up to Tessa, but I quickly realise in the faint light of the almost darkness that this is not Tessa. I can't believe he traded places with Tessa, she is such a sell-out. His shoulders are so strong, and I can see all sorts of muscles lining up on his perfect back. My breathing is getting faster, and I try to calm down. I close my eyes and pretend to sleep until it hits me that that would just be stupid, he knows I just got into bed.

I lie quietly and he then turns to face me. I am trying to control my breathing, it's so quiet but I am so nervous being this close to him that I think our neighbours could hear my breathing. He smells like roses, no, he smells like lemon, maybe it's vanilla. I am so nervous that my senses aren't working. He moves closer to me and the closer he gets, the faster I breathe. I try to listen for a sound, but no one stirs, everyone is fast asleep. I want to tell him to move away but that is not what I want; I really, really want him to come closer, so I move a little closer to him. I'm scared, I'm nervous and I can't think. I want to scream because now I feel excited, he is inches away from me and I can feel his breath on my skin, on my nose, and he is so close, I am almost afraid we will knock heads. I wait, and I close my eyes and I wait, and then it hits me like a wave……. I have never been kissed.

Suddenly, before my brain can catch up with my thoughts, I feel his lips. They tenderly brush my lips, and I can't even think, I can't move, I wait again and there

it is, only this time the kiss is real, I feel him come right up against me, close enough for the kiss to deepen. I try to remember what I have seen on TV but there is no time, he opens my mouth with his tongue, and I follow his lead. He puts his hand on my hip and I feel that electric shock that I felt so many years ago and it's such a familiar feeling that I melt, I pour myself into the kiss; I feel his hand move from my hip to my backside and I can't control myself any longer, I give over, I give it all over into the moment, the reality that I will remember this moment forever, my first kiss.

CHAPTER 5

A one shot on Lee and William

LEE's POV

It's been such a hectic morning, running around and trying to get Lilly a birthday gift. We have known each other for four years and I live next door to her, but it feels like we are sisters. She is amazing and she is an incredibly good friend. My mum and I found her a beautiful bag and I filled it with some lip gloss, sunglasses, and chocolates, now it's time to get ready. I really want to look nice as William will be there and I kinda have a thing for him. He has been sending me all the right signals and I have never had a boyfriend, so I don't know how this works, but I am definitely going to try. Will is so sexy and strong, he has perfect green eyes and silky black hair. I even told my mum about him. I am wearing a soft pink dress with yellow sandals and a yellow sunhat. My mum said I looked cute so now I think I need to change; I can't look cute for my first date. Okay, not my first date, he didn't ask me, but I mean I need to look good. Hopefully, my bikini will do the trick. It is a pink bikini and shows off my tiny boobs; oh, I wish I had bigger breasts. My mum says they will come in when they are ready, but I am ready now. Last look in the mirror and I'm off. "Mum, I'm leaving for Lilly's party. I will be home by 10pm as you said." With that, I grab my handbag and Lilly's gift.

I walk to her house, and I let myself in, we are old friends and Aunty Kate said I don't have to knock because I am like family. Will is sleeping and I go into his room without thinking. I just stand there; I don't even realise I have stepped into his room. He slowly opens his eyes and I almost die, what do I say? Why am I in his room? He smiles his sexy smile and I melt. Suddenly he pulls my hand and I end up on his lap and we are kissing passionately. I have kissed a boy before, so I know what I am doing, but I have never been kissed like this before. I put my hands on the back of his head and I kiss him like I have never kissed anyone. He grabs me by my waist, and I feel like I am in heaven. We kiss for what feels like an eternity and when I pull away, his eyes are still closed. We linger and I can't help this ridiculous grin on my face.

Lee: "What was that about?"
Will: "I couldn't resist any longer, what were you doing in my room anyway?"
Lee: "I don't know, honestly, I just found myself in here," I tell him the truth because no lie would have worked.
Will: "Well, I am glad. Are you okay with what just happened?"
Lee: "Yes, I am."
Will: "Great, let's do it again."

And with that we kiss again, I almost launch myself at him when the sound of Tessa passing his room makes me jump. He pulls himself together and I fix my lip gloss and as I am walking to the door, he smacks my ass and says, "I'll see you tonight, call your mum and ask to sleep over." I nod and walk into Lilly's bedroom and get changed. Should I tell her? I don't want her to be angry, I don't know how she will take it as I have never made mention as to how I feel about him. I decide I will tell her tomorrow; this was just one kiss. I don't even know if it will turn into something. Although he did ask me to sleep over, so let's first see what his plans are for tonight. We go down to the pool and I spend my day making Lilly feel special, it is her birthday after all. Tessa gives Lilly a soda and I make the hubbly in the meantime. Lilly introduces us to two guys, Romeo and Dillan, and I see Dillan smile and wink at me. I immediately look up and try to see if Will just saw that, but he is talking to Romeo. I think Romeo is into Lilly

but he's trying to act cool. Will takes my hand and asks me to swim with him; I look back and Lilly is smiling. I smile at her and decide to just enjoy Will's company and not to overthink everything, so we swim and splash each other and then the others join us and it's suddenly a pool party. Will takes me to the end of the pool and puts my legs around him, we are floating and watching the others play with a ball in the water, and I say, "Let's join them." He nods, and we play a few games. The sun is hot and it's a momentous day - well, my day is more than great.

Lilly says we should get out and eat as her dad let her know that the food was ready. Her parents are so cool, they set up the table with food and drinks and they left us to enjoy our lunch. We eat, smoke hubbly and then I call Lilly to the side. I can't keep this from her, William keeps smiling at me and I giggle every five seconds, she will notice something, and I don't want her to be upset or hurt that I kept it from her. I decide to include Tessa as we are all best friends and I hate secrets. "Lilly, there is something I need to tell you." She interrupts me and says she knows Will and I like each other. Tessa starts giggling and says she thinks the whole world knows, "Anyone with eyes can see that you too are ready to burst with these hidden feelings, Lee. Explore the relationship and see where it goes, as long as your relationship with my brother doesn't affect our friendship." I am filled with relief. Lilly tells everyone that we are sleeping over and she has already spoken to all our parents, and her parents said it was okay as long as William was around to keep an eye on things. I look over to Will and he smiles and winks at me. The evening dawned on us so quickly, and we are in the pool house. Lilly's mum said they were going to the police station, and we don't have to worry, I sure hope everything is alright.

I ask Will to walk home with me so I can get some pjs and I want to speak to my mum just to make sure that she is on board with the arrangement, and I don't want her to worry. We walk down their driveway in the dark, and before we reach our gate, he pulls me into his arms and kisses me hard. The kiss is almost painful, but I feel his need for me, and I let him have this moment. He puts his hand under my t-shirt and gently massages my breast, and I feel a weird feeling, almost like a warm sensation in my stomach and between my legs. I feel like I can

explode, I don't know how much longer I can stand this feeling in my stomach. My knees feel weak, and he starts to kiss my neck. He moves me gently against the wall and he starts to kiss my chest and he continues to move lower; he reaches my breast. I throw my head back and I don't know what is happening, but this feels so good. He stops, I almost cry but I am so glad he stopped, we are not ready for second base, although I think we have passed the second base by far. We stand in the dark under the tree, and I will never forget this day. I calm myself and we stand outside for a few minutes more before I go inside. I grab my pjs and kiss my mum and say goodnight to my dad; William is standing at the front door and my dad thanks him for walking with me. We say goodbye and head out.

We are all blowing up some airbeds and William tells us who is sleeping where, and he warns that he wants no funny business. He stares directly at Romeo, and this makes us giggle. Before we sleep, the guys make a fire, and we all sit down and enjoy our pizza and listen to Dillan's funny stories. Romeo gets a text from his mum, and he reads it out loud for all of us, "Romeo, your dad has been released and all is well, don't worry. I will pick you guys up tomorrow. Let me know what time. Goodnight, Love Mum." We all relax because we knew he was worried about his father, but he seems like a weight has been lifted from his shoulders.

We lie down to sleep and Will is sleeping next to me. I fall asleep quickly, without any trouble - it must be because of the water and all the swimming - and I when I open my eyes again, the sun is shining, and morning has come. Will is staring at me and no one else is around. "Are you watching me sleep?" I smile at him, and he says, "Yes, Lee…there is something I need to ask you, will you be my girlfriend?" I almost scream from excitement, but I keep my composure and simply answer, yes! We lie there with no one around and I kiss him; firstly, I give him soft butterfly kisses all over his face, first his forehead then his cheek, his chin, and lastly, I end on his lips - my very first boyfriend! He deepens the kiss and pulls me onto him. My breathing has increased again; I can hear him moaning, he keeps saying my name between kisses and then he pushes me off him. I'm shocked and scared and I don't know what I did wrong, so I start crying. He grabs me and holds me tight, "Shhh, Baby, I'm sorry, the kiss just got out of hand, and I started getting really…...uhm…. horny, I didn't want to scare you. I

want us to take things slow. You are still very young and I'm… I'm just so sorry, Baby." I wipe my tears and smile at him because I feel relieved. There is nothing for me to say. I know Will likes me, he respects me, and he wants to take care of me, for that I will be forever grateful, but I do want to experience what I felt last night. That was amazing and I would want Will to be my first.

I join my friends for breakfast after a great night and a very surprising morning, and I update them on the Will front. I leave out a lot of details because I don't want to gross Lilly out, he is her brother after all, so I just tell them we kissed, and he asked me to be his girlfriend. They are both very excited for me and Tessa says that this was long overdue and that makes us laugh. I hope our relationship works and lasts forever. I am excited to tell my mum, she was the only one who knew how I felt about William, so I don't think she would be too surprised. I am so in love. I hope William doesn't break my heart.

CHAPTER 6

Edward's POV

I woke up this morning and I actually feel sad leaving Lisa, we spent a good week relaxing and working things out. Romeo is up, busy studying for his finals; I say good morning, but he doesn't respond.

Edward: "I said good morning, young man, why are you ignoring me?"

Romeo: "Because every time you mess up, you ignore me. I am grown and I know something happened, but you won't treat me like your eldest son and talk to me. It has been months now, Dad, what's happening with your case and why is mum always crying or in bed?"

Edward: "Romeo, this is not your concern, Son, my lawyer is working on making the case go away. To put it mildly, I am innocent, and let's just say your mum doesn't feel well now, but she will be fine. Try not to concern yourself with problems you have no control over. As a young man, enjoy your youth."

Romeo: "Why won't you tell me? Why did she die, Dad? Did you kill her?"

Edward: "It was suicide, Son, you saw the accident; she killed herself and I am very sorry about that, but like I said, there is nothing you can do about it, so why worry?"

Romeo: "So why were the cops looking for you?"

Edward: "We are sure they made a mistake; now focus on your schoolwork. Good luck, Son, I will see you this evening." I walk out of the room, but I feel horrible, I have always wanted to be a role model for my children, especially my sons. I vow in that moment that I will do better, and I will be better. They will be proud to call me their dad. I have been messing up for way too long.

LILLY'S POV

I am so excited; Romeo and I have been dating for six months since that night we had our first kiss and things have been going great. At first all we did was kiss and I thought maybe he didn't like me, he has never asked me to be his girlfriend, so I was almost sure he didn't like me, but then one day he introduced me to a friend of his and said *this is my girlfriend*, so I went with it and now we are in a relationship.

He comes to me every weekend and we kiss, a lot. Romeo and Dillan are spending two weeks with us over the December holidays, and I hope this brings us closer together, he has been acting rather strangely these last six weeks or so. I am standing in my bedroom staring out of the window when I smile while hearing my mum telling Romeo I am upstairs. I didn't expect him today, so I hope nothing is wrong. I wait for him to knock and tell him to come in, then we both hear my mum shout, "Doors open, please!" Ah, she's so embarrassing.

Lilly: "Hi, what are you doing here? Don't mind my mum." I walk towards him, and he smiles and comes closer to kiss me hello.

Romeo: "Hi, Sexy, come here. I came to say hello. Is that a problem?"

Lilly: "Definitely not."

Romeo: I have to tell her, or maybe rather not. I don't want to hurt her feelings, but I am in love with Amy *and* Lilly. Maybe I can date both girls? I mean Amy isn't even from here. They need never know about each other. "So, I am almost done with high school, my parents want me to go to a college or something, but I really

want to start making some money. My dad said he can get me a job at his offices, but I don't want to be an accountant like him."

Lilly: "What do you want to do then? Do you have something in mind?"

Romeo: "I have no idea. It's too late now anyway, all the schools, colleges, whatever, are probably full of the many students who made up their minds months ago. I once told my dad that I wanted to be a lawyer and he laughed at me and said that I wasn't cut out for it. When I explained that it was my passion, he said I needed to work with numbers and do something that would make me money. That put me off, I didn't even think of school after that, so now I don't know anymore."

Lilly: "What! That's stupid. My dad's a lawyer and his best friend is a lawyer too and they make money too. Let me speak to him and see what the requirements are and what you need to do."

Romeo: "No, Lilly. I can't ask you to do that."

Lilly: "You didn't ask me, I offered."

Romeo's POV

Lilly is so sweet; she's actually willing to help me and she listened to me without judgement. When I told Amy that I didn't know what I wanted to do, she said I had better make up my mind and decide, because she wasn't dating a loser who sits at home all day and doesn't do anything. Then when I told her about my passion for law, she laughed and said I couldn't go to college for that long, she would get bored, so, I just stopped talking to her. She really made me feel bad, but at that time I didn't realise it.

I didn't think there was a girl for me who would understand me and would treat me the way Lilly does. I still love Amy because I've never thought of her as a mean person, but these last few months with Lilly have certainly shown me I could have someone who supports me. Who am I kidding? Amy is so mature and sexy and much older. We can do certain things that Lilly just isn't ready for. So, I make my decision there and then; I will keep seeing Amy because she

is amazing and gives me all I want and we have fun together, and I will keep seeing Lilly because I really care about her, and I want to see where this goes. I am watching Lilly as she talks and talks, and she didn't even realise I haven't been paying attention; this makes me smile, she is so bubbly. She insists on asking her dad and says that when I come to stay over for the two weeks, she will have some answers for me.

I decide to shut her up, she's been going on far too long. I am sitting at the end of her bed, and I pull her close to me. I tell myself to remember that the door is open and to listen for any sounds and footsteps. She looks at me, surprised, but doesn't stop me. I look at her properly for the first time today and I see she is wearing a short white skirt, dammit! I could be using this as a rag to wash my dad's car, it's so short, and a blue top that shows me her huge breasts, she really is blessed for a fifteen-year-old, and she's barefoot, with her hair in a bun. She is breathtakingly gorgeous, and I want to kiss her from the top of her forehead to the bottom of her feet. I slowly lift her chin and give her the deepest kiss; I even shock myself. That felt amazing.

I move closer to her, and we are making out like the horny teenagers we are. We sit, talk, and kiss, and talk and kiss and talk and kiss, most of the afternoon. I don't even realise we have both fallen asleep until I hear my dad's voice and I know it is time for me to leave. I drag myself up, I have a terrible gut feeling and I immediately know that with Lilly, I am in trouble. I don't even want to go home. I slowly get up, trying not to wake her, but she's such a light sleeper, I see her eyelids open and when she sees it's just me, she closes them again and dozes off. I kiss her forehead and whisper, "I love you."

I almost jump back, what did I just say? Shit! I hope she didn't hear me. When I look down at her, she's still fast asleep, so I make a quick escape. I almost run to her bedroom door. I'm freaking out. Calm down, I tell myself. I have never said *I love you* to anyone, what was I thinking? I stand outside her bedroom door; thinking is this how I feel or was this just the heat of the moment? I walk down the stairs to meet my dad and it hits me like a lightning bolt. I know what I have to do now, I have to break up with Amy.

Lilly slowly opens her eyes and blushes. She was pretending to sleep all this time and she heard what Romeo had said. She is feeling all kinds of feelings.

Oh, my word, he just said he loves me, and I know I wasn't dreaming. It was so hard trying to pretend to be asleep. Do I love him? I don't know, I know I like him a lot but are my feelings that strong? I smile because even though I don't say it out loud, I know I do.

Dillan's POV

I stand by the window, and I watch my brother standing outside. I wonder what he is doing out there. I wait for a few minutes, then I contemplate going downstairs to ask him if he is okay when I see a small figure coming up the driveaway. I watch, fascinated. Oh, it's Amy. Well, this is interesting, wasn't he just with Lilly? Lilly is a nice person; how can he do this to her? Romeo always thinks he can do as he pleases and hurt whoever he wants to, but Lilly is my friend and she has a heart of gold, like I said, she's a nice person, so this is wrong.

I see him kiss Amy and that's it, I've had enough, its time I put an end to his ultra-ego, so I walk towards my cellphone, and I dial Lilly's number.

Romeo's POV

I called Amy to come over so that I could do what I knew was the right decision, but I feel so bad. It is time, our relationship was great and nothing bad happened, I just found someone I like better. I want to give Lilly and me a fair shot and I don't want to hurt her. I see Amy coming up the driveway and she seems surprised to see me waiting for her by our front porch. She dives in for a hello kiss and asks me what's wrong.

Amy: "Hi, Sweetheart, what's wrong? It sounded rather urgent."
Romeo: "It is urgent. Can we sit on the stairs for a minute?"

Amy: "No, when we sit there it means you always want to pick a fight; is that what this is, a fight?"

Romeo: "It's not a fight, or at least I hope it won't be." My cellphone rings and it is Lilly, this must be important because I have just seen her, and she never calls me. I indicate to Amy that I need one minute and take the call. Immediately Lilly asks me who Amy is and I get up to give myself some privacy. I lie and say I don't know who she is and she says she knows I am with Amy right now and things are not going to work if I am dishonest, and she dumps me, and with that hangs up. I am shocked. How did she know Amy was here now?

Amy: "So, what's going on?"

Romeo: "Nothing, I just missed you and wanted to chill. Let's go to the back and make a hubbly for us, Baby." I lie to Amy so at least I have one girlfriend now, seeing that Lilly ended things, but I have a strange feeling and I need to find out who told her about Amy. She couldn't have just known, Amy isn't from here, so it must definitely have been one of my family members. My dad wouldn't say anything, he would encourage me to play both girls, so it's either Mum or Dillan. I need to get to the bottom of this. As we reach the backyard, we go into the back room that we use to chill in when my friends come over and Amy takes off her top and my train of thought is lost. She has small boobs, they aren't as great as Lilly's, but who cares, all I need now is some relief and I can deal with all the drama later. I kiss her and rub her tiny breasts; she moans in my mouth and grabs my t-shirt. I hate it when she does that, but I let it slide. She kisses me so hard that we knock teeth, but she moans in my mouth and pulls down my pants. Sex with Amy is always a disaster. I close my eyes as her hands are on me and I softly moan, OH, YES, LILLY!

CHAPTER 7

3 YEARS LATER

Update

The two families haven't seen each other in three years. This is life, this is reality. Our lives are so consumed by things that take us away from one another, our jobs, school, bills and so much more, but in essence, life does go on. Everyone is different now, older, and leading different lives. – AUTHOR

Edward and Lisa are doing well; they are often home with their sons. Dillan is now seventeen and Romeo is twenty-two. Dillan is still at school, and he is very dedicated to his schoolwork. He has a very shy girlfriend, so no one has met her yet, but he seems to like her very much; Romeo is studying law and working part time at a firm that Lilly's dad Wes helped him get into.

Speaking of Wes, he has booked a romantic getaway for Kate. He has given William stern instructions about behaving and watching over Lilly. They are taking Marsha with them due to her age, as well as her nanny. Marsha is now nine, Lilly is seventeen, and William is twenty-one. William has a stable job as a junior engineer and a beautiful girlfriend Nisha. She is pregnant, and they are expecting a son. Lilly and Romeo haven't seen each other in the last three years, making what happens next overly exciting but awkward.

Lilly's POV

I hate it when it rains. My parents have finally left, thank God. Marsha was really working on my nerves. We have the whole weekend to ourselves. I know Will is going to see Nisha and spend time with her as she is due soon, so that means I am technically home alone. I'm kinda bummed that Lee and Will didn't work out, but I do like Nisha. We get along and she is so kind and sweet to William. A group of us are going to the stadium, it's Friday and I have no classes today, so my friends have decided to go to watch a local soccer match. I don't like soccer, but I like hanging out with my college friends. I am going with them and obviously Tessa and Lee too. My friends are fun, and we chill together almost every day. I decide to wear a white top that has gold leaves on the front and it hugs my body, together with very short denim shorts and white sneakers, gold hooped earrings, and some light make up. I tie my hair up into a high ponytail; my hair has grown over the years, and I love it. I walk towards Will's room, grab my keys and cellphone, and I want to tell him I am leaving, and I won't be home late, but I hear him on the phone and he is inviting someone over, so I listen to his conversation. I have been doing this for years.

Will: "Yes, Bud, no problem, you guys can sleep over. There is enough room, you know that. No, why? Ha ha ha, sure! No, I didn't tell her. Yes, I am okay with it, just don't hurt her again, I will kill you this time. Now? You are coming into the area, okay. Well, I am going to Nisha now. Yes, make yourself at home. Okay. Bye. Cool. Bye."

He hangs up and I pretend to only walk up to his room now, and say, "Hi Will, I'm leaving now, see you later. Oh, and heads up, I am coming back with my friends, but we will chill outside in the pool house." He raises his brow at me and says, "We'll see," and smiles. Now this makes me inquisitive, "What are you on about? Who were you speaking to on the phone?" I ask him, and he says my friends might not want to chill with this weather and rain coming in. I don't believe him, but I let it go, it is cold outside. He tells me he is going to Nisha and demands that I get a jacket and change my shorts, so we each take our own keys and I ignore him, and we both leave the house.

I am picking up Lee, who lives right next door, and Tessa who lives right across from Lee. Lee comes out first and she looks great, she is wearing jeans and a tank top that shows off her belly button. Her hair is also tied up, I think due to the weather; we don't want to take a chance. And she has the hubbly bag, so I know she's ready. We sit outside and wait for Tessa, as usual. She comes out ten minutes later, wearing a tight white dress; she has the smallest body between the three of us. She looks amazing, and the diva she is. She comes carrying a small handbag and gets into the car. We look at her and laugh as she applies more lip gloss. I tell the girls that that the guys will be meeting us at the stadium, and we drive off. Suddenly my phone rings and the screen shows 'Baby' with a heart next to it, which is weird because I am single. It takes me almost a minute to answer because I am driving and confused, but I decide to find out who I last saved as 'Baby'.

Lilly: "Hello."
Baby: "Hi, where are you?"
Lilly: "Who is this?"
Baby: "Romeo."

My heart stops and I don't know what to say. I am quiet for so long, he interjects and says, "I am at your house. Will said I could come over and he would leave a key, but I think he forgot." Why didn't Will warn me? Idiot! The next thing I know, I am telling him about the stadium, and he says he is on his way but laughs as he says this. I drop the phone and tell my friends about the call, but my stomach is churning, and this is a bit much and so confusing. We pull up at the stadium and I suddenly realise this is a prank and relax. The last time my mum spoke to Aunty Lisa telephonically, she said Romeo now lives with his granny five hours away, so I smile and think maybe they want to get a reaction out of me. I ignore the call and join my friends. Ten minutes later, no Romeo, so I relax even more and enjoy the day.

We are making a hubbly pipe and laughing at something my friend said when I look up and see William and Nisha. They are standing two rows up and they are talking, and they seem so excited and happy, and then suddenly I see him, Romeo. He looks exactly the way I remember, only now he is taller and more

muscular. He looks amazing and he is dressed in a blue t-shirt with black tracksuit pants, and I can see the shape of the muscles in his legs. He is wearing a thick gold bracelet, and I almost faint when I see the gold ring on his finger, but I quickly see that it is on his right hand, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I am so nervous I stare at him and stop laughing, and I feel that familiar feeling, the pull between us. He is just standing there, staring at me, watching me with my friends. A movement from something Will does catches my eye and I see him calling me over. Arrgghh! I hate my brother, why would he call me there? I walk over, and when I get there, it's almost as if my body has betrayed me; it's warm, and I mean really hot. I'm burning inside, and jittery, and I feel like my mouth has gone dry from eating a cup of sand. Romeo says hello and I smile and force my hello out when one of my friends comes charging at me, laughing so hard he can't speak. He wants to tell me something funny, but he looks up and backs away. When I try to see what made him quiet, I find Romeo giving him almost a death stare. He says he will tell me the joke later and walks back to my group.

Romeo: "Hi, how are you?"
Lilly: "I'm okay, how are you?"
Romeo: "Well, I'm great now."
Lilly: "I heard you were staying with your gran, what brings you back?"
Romeo: "Unfinished business."
Lilly: "Oh, interesting, well enjoy the rest of the game."
Romeo: "I will see you later, Lilly. Have fun with your friends."

I turn to walk away, and I can feel him staring at me. He says he will see me later and it's almost an unspoken promise. I can't stop smiling.

Romeo's POV

It's been three years and I can't wait to see Lilly. She is the only one I think of every day. Amy ended things between us when I called her Lilly's name, which was hilarious. Well, it wasn't funny then, but it is now. I decided to move to my gran for twelve months, but one thing led to another, and I ended up there for three years instead. I thought I needed a fresh start, but nothing has changed.

Now that I am back, I need to see her, I need to know if she still feels the same way about me as I feel about her.

Seeing that it has been three years, I feel half stupid thinking she would feel the same way. She is, what… seventeen or eighteen now? She's grown, she's matured, she is no longer a fourteen-year-old silly little girl, she is a woman now, and I can't wait to see what that woman looks like. I call William to see if we can catch up and he informs me that they are home alone for the weekend, and I want to scream I am so excited. He invites me over, but I feel I need to respect him as Lilly's older brother and play open cards with him, so I tell him how I feel and that I want to fix things with Lilly. He threatens me and I am not even offended, I listen and agree to his terms; I honestly want to make this right. He gives me her number and says I should call her because if she's not okay with me being around then he can't really force anything. I see she is using the same number as so many years ago, and I dial. When she answers the phone, the sweet, familiar voice comes over the headset and I melt. Yip, I've still got it bad for her.

Lilly: "Hello."
Romeo: "Hi, where are you?"
Lilly: "Who is this?"

I am a little offended when she asks me who she's speaking to because I haven't changed my number either, but I keep my cool and tell her it's me. She tells me exactly where she is and I start giggling like a damned schoolgirl. Damn, what is wrong with me? I always act a fool around Lilly. I am a little nervous about seeing her again so I call Will and ask him if he wants to go to the stadium; he sees right through me and calls me a chicken. He ends up pitying me and he says he will meet me at the stadium. When we get there, I scan the stadium and then I see her. Oh my, my, my, my…. she is beautiful. She has long, silky black hair, she's firmer, thicker, those thighs, her boobs, her arse, she's perfect. She has the tiniest shorts on, and this makes me a little angry or jealous. She is wearing a tight white top; I can see the shape of her breasts perfectly. It's so tight I can see her nipples, her waistline, and the perfect arch that forms in the lower region of her back. I am staring, I am well aware that I am staring, and I don't give a fuck who notices.

She is so beautiful; I want to jump up and down and clap my hands. The thought makes me laugh a little. She looks up, and for a second, she doesn't look my way, but then she sees me, and I feel that familiar feeling, the pull between us. Immediately I know, she must still feel something for me, she must feel this electricity too. How could anyone not notice this lightning between us? I just need to find out how deep those feelings go.

I see Will call her over and she walks towards us. Her hair is swinging from side to side and her breasts are moving up and down at just the right speed, but she doesn't make eye contact with me. She just stands there, as if she is bored and can't wait to get away from me. I try to break the silence but before I can say anything, one of her baboon friends comes running over to tell her a joke. Can't he see she's busy? I give him a cold stare and I hope this will scare him off. It does the trick, but I see that she notices how I just treated her friend, so before she has time to react, I speak.

Romeo: "Hi, how are you?"
Lilly: "I'm okay, how are you?"
Romeo: "Well, I'm great now."
Lilly: "I heard you were staying with your gran, what brings you back?"
Romeo: "Unfinished business."
Lilly: "Oh, interesting. Well, enjoy the rest of the game."
Romeo: "I will see you later, Lilly. Have fun with your friends."

I drag the last sentence and I vow to see her later. I will not leave her alone until she's mine again. I was such a fool, but I won't make that mistake twice. The game ends and I see her and her friends walk to their cars; I didn't even know she could drive now. She has a RS3 Audi, and I am not surprised - her dad only drives Audi. I want to chase her car, but she drives off and leaves me standing there alone.

William comes up behind me, scaring the shit out of me. He laughs when he sees me jump, and says, "Don't look so sad, man, it looks like you want to cry." I laugh it off because I don't want to make a fool of myself for the tenth time

today, and then he surprises me and says Lilly says you must come to the house; we are having a barbeque. I know that all her friends will be there, and she just invited me to be polite, but I am excited, and I feel like a ten-year-old who just got his Christmas present. We drive to their house and the sun has come out. Everyone is getting ready to swim. Tessa is making the hubbly, and Lee is in the water already. She really likes being around the guys, she isn't even shy about it. Will and Nisha have gone to see her parents, so he is not here, and I am the odd one out.

I go to look for Lilly and I see she is preparing salads for the barbeque. She sees me come in, and there we go again - we just stare at each other. I can't take the tension anymore, so I slowly walk towards her, trying to close the distance between us, physically and emotionally, and I know she is single from the way she shifts her body to face me. It's like we are having a conversation with our eyes. I let her know that I want to kiss her by licking my lips and she still hasn't moved, but she hasn't run away either, so I continue until I am standing right in front of her. She starts to say something, and I know it will kill me if she rejects me. She's so close to me, she whispers, "This doesn't mean anything," and she lifts herself onto her toes and we are all over each other, and that electric shock that we felt almost nine years ago ignites the kiss. I kiss her with a desperate energy because that's just what it is, desperation. Desperation to be near her, to taste her, to feel her, but her words ring in my ears, "This doesn't mean anything." I can't kiss her when she feels this way, so it takes almost everything I have but I slow down and stop the kiss, because to me, this kiss does mean everything.

CHAPTER 8

Lilly's POV

We head outside and spend the whole afternoon swimming and playing games. We have been eating and partying non-stop, and one of my college friends is our designated bartender. He keeps our glasses full and cold. There are so many people. William and Nisha are back but they are sitting all cosy under the blankets and making out. We tease them a few times, but it didn't work, so we all gave up. We spend hours playing 30 Seconds and the guys really enjoy winning. Lee is laughing, and that cost us time, hence we lost badly.

It's almost midnight and everyone is drunk; Nisha and William go off to bed and my college friends have left. Tessa is sleeping in Marsha's room, and she looks weird curled up on the small princess bed. I smile and close the door. Lee is in my bed and there is no room for me because she is lying horizontally. I laugh and close my door. I walk towards the far end of the house to the only bedroom that I assume no one knows about because it is so hidden and no one ever uses it, and I find Romeo in there, but he is just sitting on the end of the bed.

Lilly: "Hi, sorry, I didn't think anyone would be in here."
Romeo: "No, it's okay, come in. Why are you still up?"
Lilly: "I wanted to make sure everyone was comfortable."
Romeo: "Can we talk?"
Lilly: "Sure, what's wrong?"

Romeo: "You know I like you Lilly, I want to fix things. What did you mean when we kissed, and you said this doesn't change anything?" I wait for her as she walks into the bedroom and sits down on the bed beside me.

Lilly: "I didn't want you to think that we were back together after one kiss. You broke my heart, Romeo."

Romeo: "I know I did, but that was three years ago, we have both grown up." Surely, she can't be holding onto that?

Lilly: "Maybe, but you also can't just show up and expect not to work at it and assume everything is going to be okay, just because you've shown up."

Romeo's POV

I try to hide my smile; did she just say I need to work to get her back? Well, challenge accepted. "No problem, I will make an effort." She looks at me and it's like she doesn't believe me, but before I know it, I am walking towards the door, I lock it and switch off the light. I take her hand and lead her to the bed, 'Don't worry, I won't do anything you don't want me to, I just really need to kiss you again," I reassure her. I untie her hair and I start to slowly kiss her. I force my tongue between her lips, and she parts her lips. I lie her down and I am lying next to her. I want her to feel safe and relaxed, so I kiss her slowly and more intensely. I move my lips to her chin, and I see her eyes are closed, she's enjoying this, good. I move lower and I kiss her throat and slowly move to the side of her neck, where I suck, lick and nibble, then I hear a small moan escape her lips and it's like I pushed a button. She throws me on my back and sits on me, she lifts my t-shirt over my head and I never thought this day would come, she's a madwoman. She kisses me hard, and I get hard instantly. I take off the piece of material she calls a top, blouse, whatever girls call these things, and I massage her breasts. They are so big and full, she has always had amazing boobs, but damn, they feel better than they look.

I don't know how far this will go, I don't know if she's ready, I don't know if she has ever done this before, but I want her so badly. I want to let her take the lead;

this kiss has just gotten a thousand times more intense. I move away the covers and we are just lying there, kissing and touching each other. I love the sensation of feeling her skin against mine, but I need more. I want to feel her all over me, I want to be inside her. She moves her hand over my thigh, and I want to scream *A little higher, Baby*, but I let her take her time. I continue rubbing her breasts. She moans in my mouth, and I want to explode. Finally, she touches my penis, it's such a light touch, and I am silently begging her for more. I can't wait anymore so I take off my pants and I remove her shorts. We are lying there, in our underwear, exposed.

She puts her hands down my drawers and I am so hard, I want her so badly. I put my hand in her panties and I start rubbing her, softly and as gently as I can manage, but she suddenly stops. She says nothing, she doesn't look at me and I don't know what to do. She whispers, "I've never had sex before," and without another word she gets up and walks to the window. She doesn't look me in the eye or say anything else. I sit up and she's wearing a black lace bra and black hot pants that hug her arse like a glove. She has an amazing body.

Romeo: "Lilly, we don't need to do anything. Why don't we get some rest, and we can talk tomorrow? There's no rush, I am not going anywhere."

Lilly: "Are you sure? I don't want you to think I just lead you on."

Romeo: "Don't be silly, I told you, this time we will do this right. Come back to bed, it's late."

We fall asleep, and the next morning, I wake up and I see this beautiful young lady sound asleep next to me. The bed isn't that big, so we slept close to each other. I have never felt so euphoric in my life. I'm just lying there staring at her when she opens her eyes, making me jump. She giggles, and I melt. "I love your laugh, Lilly, please will you give me another chance?" She looks at me, with big, worried eyes and I know I ambushed her, but she whispers, "Yes, Romeo, we can try again," and then she hides under the covers. I try not to laugh at her, but why is she hiding?

Tessa's POV

It's been such a nice weekend; I am sad to go home. Romeo and Lilly seem happy, and I am happy for my bestie, but I hope he doesn't hurt her again. I feel bad because I have been keeping a secret from Lilly, but I just haven't found a moment. I have been seeing a guy. Oh, he is so amazing, but we had sex, and I didn't tell Lilly. His name is Zane and I really like him. Our first time was magical; I keep replaying it over and over in my head. How he kissed me, touched me, and made love to me. I close my eyes and I envision that day again:

I enter his apartment and we go straight to his room. I have been here before, so many times, and I feel okay because this is now a familiar place. The apartment is quiet, and he takes both my hands into his, pulling me on top of him. I kiss him slowly as he takes off my clothes. He lifts my chin, and he is staring at me. He has the most penetrating green eyes. He takes his finger and runs it over my breast, and I feel so vulnerable, I am naked and a virgin, but we have talked about this a lot, and he assured me I would be safe with him. He pulls on my nipples, and it feels good; he lifts my body and sits upright so that he is flush against his headboard. I have only known this guy for two months, but this feels right. I am sitting on him; he has not entered me yet. He lowers his head and starts kissing my breasts, I feel his hand between my legs, and I am so nervous, yet so ready. He slowly puts his finger inside me and moves it in a circular motion. I feel warm and I throw my head back and moan, his mouth never leaving my breast.

He lifts my body and puts me down on him and I gasp. He asks me if I am okay and I say no, this is too deep, so he flips me over and now I am beneath him. He uses his finger again, gently stroking me, and nibbles on my mouth. Again, he enters me, and this feels so much better. "Okay?" he asks, and I am so glad he's so caring and careful. I can't speak, so I nod, and he starts to move; this is an amazing feeling and I try to open my eyes, but I can't, they are so heavy from all these feelings. I feel a sensation from somewhere deep inside me and I start to quiver, my toes curl and I am almost crying. It as if he has some power over me, and with one thrust, he rolls his eyes up, tilts his head back and finds his own release without making a sound.

I open my eyes and I realise I am alone in bed and I blush as if someone has seen me. I need to tell Lilly and Lee. I have had sex almost every week since, and I can't keep this secret anymore, so I get up, get ready and go downstairs with a plan. I find Lilly and Lee making breakfast, okay, Lilly mainly, because Lee is just sitting there with the hubbly, again.

Tessa: "Are you ladies alone in the kitchen?"

Lilly: "Good morning to you too, and yes, all the guys are outside swimming."

Lee: "Ha ha ha, good morning, Tessa, wanna smoke?"

Tessa: "No, I don't wanna smoke and I don't have time for your sarcasm, I need to let it out."

Lilly: "Let what out?"

Lee: "Are you seriously trying to pass gas in the kitchen?"

Tessa: "Oh my God, would you two be quiet!"

Lilly: "Okay, jeez, what's wrong?"

Tessa: "I have a boyfriend." And of course, they start screaming and giggling and I can't help but smile, just the reaction I knew I would get. I continue, "His name is Zane and he is amazing. I spend the next few minutes telling them where he stays and what he does and how much I love him.

Lilly: "I am so happy for you, Tessa. Congratulations, girl."

Lee: "Yeah, me too."

Tessa: "There's more."

Lilly: "What"

Lee: "Oh my God, is he married?"

Tessa: "No, you idiot, we had sex," and there they go again, screaming and giggling like they have won the lottery.

Lilly: "Okay, okay, let's calm down. You need to tell us everything!"

Tessa: I tell them exactly how it happened and what happened and where we had sex for the first time and explain that after that it got easier and longer, and they laugh again. Just then Romeo walks in and complains that he is hungry. I feel so much better after speaking to them, they are my best friends. I know they

won't judge me. I help Lilly dish up breakfast for everyone and we all sit around this island in the kitchen.

I suddenly feel sick, I run as fast as I can to the bathroom and I make it just in time, I throw up almost everything I ate. Lilly comes into the bathroom, followed by Lee, and she asks me if I'm okay. Of course, Lee suggests that maybe I am still drunk because I had a lot to drink last night, but I tell them I hardly had anything to drink and I feel fine, I was fine all morning, maybe it was the eggs? Lilly acts offended and says she makes great eggs and we all laugh at her reaction, then Lilly looks all serious and raises her eyebrows, she looks at us with big eyes and says maybe it is the eggs. This makes us laugh even louder, we are all sitting on the bathroom floor, and she spends minutes trying to convince me she tampered with the eggs and we were all about to die from poisoned eggs. Then it hits me like a hammer, "Guys, I am three weeks late, I missed my period and didn't even notice, I think… I think… I can't even say it out loud, I think I might be pregnant!" I start crying hysterically.

CHAPTER 9

Kate's POV

I love Christmas, it's only a few weeks away and I can't wait. It is my sister's and my favourite holiday; we always do our shopping together. The friends and family, the atmosphere, the food and drinks, the decorations and festivities, it is all absolutely amazing; but I hate the festive rush, the shopping and that everywhere is always so full of people, yet I enjoy the liveliness. I need to get to do my Christmas shopping. Wes said he had a surprise for us, and I can't wait for him to come home, firstly so that I can have his credit card, and secondly so he can tell me what this surprise is all about. I have a good job, but I like spending my husband's money. The thought makes me smile. I hear the garage and I know that Wes is home. William is with Nisha; he sure fell fast and hard. I don't know how I feel about her, but he is a grown man and very stubborn, he never listens to me. I've met her twice, both times at a family gathering, and my sister says it seems like she is always jumpy and seems like she has a big secret; I don't know, might just be our imagination. Lilly and Romeo are in some relationship, she's so young and I am always worried about her. I am very uncertain about him too. I like him, but he has broken her heart before. The last time they were together, he disappeared with no reason, or at least that is my assumption because it is so hard to get what is happening with the two of them. I get up and greet my husband.

Wesley's POV:

My wife loves Christmas and I know that this time of the year before the holidays I don't see her much. She goes shopping with her sister and mother and sometimes she drags me along, but I know she loves going with them. I love the holidays too, but I like the holidays to have a holiday. Kate is always busy, it's like a second job keeping up with her. I want a vacation - the beach, blue sky, warm seawater, and sand between my toes. Kate just wants her whole family around and she always cooks up a storm. I love my wife's food; the size of my belly shows just how much.

Edward's POV

I am sitting at work, in my office, alone. I am daydreaming, imagining myself on a boat on the open water, just enjoying the sound of the waves and relaxing. I want to take Lisa and the boys away this year in December for the holidays, she needs one. After the bad news we received, they deserve a break, so I end my daydreams and I plan to make it a reality. I call my assistant; he is such a nerd. Lisa insisted I have a male assistant and I actually like this guy; he is efficient, and I never have to ask him twice. "Sam, can you please come in here for a minute?" He comes straight away, notepad and pen in hand, ready to get instructions, I love it. "Please find me a holiday destination, somewhere local, maybe Kalk Bay Harbour? Okay wait, not maybe. Get me accommodation there, book flights and make sure we are in first class. It will be my wife and myself and my sons." I think to myself rather than say it out loud that Romeo will probably give me grief about going, since he's a grown man now, but he needs to spend time with his family - this will make Lisa happy.

I also need you to get me two cars I can rent that side, one for us all and one for just Lisa and me in case we want to separate for a day. Make sure Romeo has his own place and space, I want him to feel like he knows I thought about him. Also get reservations at restaurants, some nights just for Lisa and me, and most nights for us all. Get back to me when you have some plans in place. He leaves in a rush, and I am on a mission. Within the hour, Sam has booked a cosy home

on the beach, and I love it. It is huge and we won't get in each other's way. There is an upstairs apartment for Romeo, with his own entrance, we are close to the beach and there is a warm swimming pool. Lisa will love it. Dillan is easy-going so I know he will love the place regardless.

I have been to Kalk Bay Harbour, you can buy fish and chips there and eat it on the pier next to the small boats. I'd like to go back there because I know Lisa likes to try the locals' cuisines and she wants to experience their lifestyles. There is a genuinely nice man named Albert who works on the corner, creating the most beautiful sculptures out of wire and metal; I hope he is still there. The boys will enjoy the talent out there. Although I know they are both in serious relationships, I think they are just too young, and they have time to explore. I am at peace when Sam lets me know everything is in place and in three weeks we will be in the Western Cape, relaxing and sightseeing.

Lisa and Edward:

Edward: "Sugarplum, I'm home!"

Lisa: "Hi, Handsome, why are you in such a good mood?" I come out to meet my husband at the door.

Edward: "I couldn't wait to get home! Where are the boys?"

Lisa: "Your sons are with their girlfriends as usual, so, what is the surprise?"

Edward: "I booked us a holiday; we are leaving in three weeks. I wanted it to be a surprise for you, but I need your help."

Lisa: "Oh Ed, that's so sweet. Thank you. We need some family time. What do you need me to do?"

Edward: "Everything is arranged. Sam was amazing, as usual, but I know this week is the week you do shopping so I didn't want you to get things you can't use at the beach. Get some comfy clothes and shoes and swimming gear and let the boys do their own shopping. Have did you cooked?" I know we have a nanny and a security detail and a maid who cleans and does the laundry, and we are probably rich enough to hire a cook, but that is one thing

I asked my wife to agree with me on. I love my wife's cooking. When we got married, so many years ago, we had barely known each other for six months when we made the decision to get married. I asked her to make sure she always makes our meals, and she asked me to always make sure I was a good father to our unborn children. When we eventually had children, I messed up and didn't keep my promise to her, but things are better now.

Lisa: "Yes, I did, are you hungry?" Hello? I wave my hand, signalling him. Edward is acting strange; he goes off to La La Land sometimes, and I can't get him to pay attention tonight.

Edward: "Yes, sorry, Baby. I am starving. I am going to take a shower; will you have supper ready when I get out? I will pour us wine and we can have a nice dinner together, just you and me."

Edward's POV

The next day, I come downstairs and find everyone around the breakfast table; Lisa is listening to the boys telling her some stories about their day yesterday. They have such a good relationship with their mother, I envy it sometimes. We enjoy breakfast together and it seems very strange to me, everyone is in a good mood, and I can't quite get used to all the chatting and laughing and debating. I feel so detached and I know now for sure that the holiday I booked is long overdue and much needed, so I decide to tell everyone seeing as they are so happy this morning. I might not get this moment again.

Edward: "Guys, can I have a minute please?" Everyone settles down and pays attention to me, so I continue, "I booked us a vacation in the Western Cape." I smile and wait for everyone to react but it's quiet.

Romeo: "For how long?"

Lisa: "Almost three weeks, we will only be back in the new year."

Dillan: "Are you crazy? Three weeks! Mum, I can't be away that long."

Edward: "Guys, you have your own rooms, Romeo you have a studio upstairs with your own entrance so you will have privacy, and it's a beautiful place."

Romeo: "I'm not going. What about the two weeks at Aunt Kate's?"

Lisa: "We are all going."

Dillan: "Mum, you and Dad can't just make decisions like this. You have to speak to us first."

Edward: "First of all, you are underage, so you don't have a choice, but I really want to spend time with all of you before you get married or move away. Come on, guys, at least google the place, have a look at it, think about it. We are right at the ocean and there is so much to do.

Romeo: "Can I bring Lilly?"

Dillan: "Can I bring my girlfriend too?"

Edward: "Okay, everyone, listen. I haven't always been a good father and I haven't always been around or considered everyone, but I have been trying. I work on my marriage every day because part of being a good father is respecting your children's mother, and the one thing I feel still needs improvement is spending time with my family, so please, grant me this?

Dillan: "Fine. I'll go."

Edward: "Romeo?"

Romeo: "Okay, yes, I'll go too. "

Lisa: "Thank you, boys."

Edward: I kiss Lisa goodbye, but she offers to walk out with me. I don't know why, she has never done this before, but when we reach the door, she says she needs to talk to me. We walk outside and she says maybe I should look at making the vacation two weeks instead of three in case we get fed up with the place. Three weeks is a long time. It takes me a few minutes, I always think about things before I decide on them or just agree with someone, but reluctantly, I know she's right. I got carried away. Three weeks is a long time for us to sightsee in one place. "I will let Sam work on it today," I say eventually. She smiles but the

smile isn't in her eyes. I know there is more she wants to change so I tell her to make a list and send it to Sam.

I just want her to be happy, so even if she wants to go on holiday for two days, so be it. She also surprises me and says that next time we should book a holiday just for the two of us, the boys are grown. I drive to work thinking about how far I have come and how happy I am, and I know that this is how I want things to be, so I am going to work, day and night, to keep things this way. The day flies by and I don't even realise it is time to head back home. Sam told me today that he is happy with the new me because there are no more long hours and work on weekends. He explains that his boyfriend is very happy, and I didn't even know that he was into men. I have nothing against gay men, I have nothing against anyone's sexuality, but it came as a shock because Sam is basically… wait… now this makes sense. I always say he is so efficient and a great assistant, which just makes so much sense now that he has told me he is gay. I laugh out loud alone in my car, thinking that a year ago he wouldn't have been as comfortable telling me such things or even talking to me at all. Even our relationship is different and better. In fact, all my colleagues have recently made comments or said something while in conversation about how I have changed. I told Lisa that it is as if they needed to get off their chests that I was a real asshole and a pain when I was so cold and closed off to the rest of the world. I get home and rush inside. I can't wait to see my family. While taking off my tie and removing my jacket, I am calling out for Lisa. The house is quiet, so I start searching room by room, but she is nowhere to be found.

The intercom phone rings and the security guard at the gate calls the house. "Sir, we have a problem. I need you to come down to the gate immediately." I am instantly annoyed and ask him if he has seen Lisa. He says he last saw her walking the grounds and she had her cellphone with her, so I say I will come down to the gate in a few minutes, and I call Lisa. She says she will meet me at the gate, and we can take a walk after, and maybe we can make out in the garden. She giggles like a teenager, and I thank God silently that this woman loves me so much.

I meet her halfway down the path and we walk hand-in-hand down to the gate when we see a young man standing at the gate. Neither of us knows who this is,

or why our security called us to the gate. He knows the rules. This is dangerous. I call to Peter, our security guard, and we make sure it is safe before getting any closer. Peter says he has searched the young man for weapons, and he doesn't even have a cellphone, he doesn't seem dangerous, so we walk closer to find out what he wants. He introduces himself as Miles and there is something in his eyes. I can't quite tell you what it is, but it stands out to me, and I am distracted by my wife's sobbing. She has just started crying, like full-on tears. I am half in shock and half paralyzed. "Baby, what's wrong? Why are you crying?" I am so confused, but she continues crying. I try to hold her upright, but she has fallen to her knees on the floor, and she is crying so much that she can't even speak. The boy is just standing there, and I ask her again to say something, or at least just try to calm down, and she finally manages to speak in between sobs. I try to kneel down to make out what she is saying but it is difficult because she is crying so much, so I crouch down, right next to her with my ear close to her face and I see her point to the young man, and I hear her whisper, "My son."

CHAPTER 10

Edward's POV

It took me almost twenty minutes to calm Lisa down and to move this conversation inside. We are seated at the dinner table and he is just standing there. I tell him to sit down, and I call the maid and ask her to make us all some tea. Lisa interjects and asks him if he is hungry, then asks the maid to make him a sandwich. Dinner will be in thirty minutes, so this annoys me. What if he isn't who he says he is, or who she claims he is, because technically he didn't say anything? I ask him what his name is, and he responds politely, "Miles, Sir, Miles Davies." I need answers**.** *How old is he? What happened? Why did she give him up?* These thoughts are driving me insane, but Lisa starts talking, half explaining herself, half telling us a story.

Lisa's POV

"I am going to tell you my story, but I will not tolerate being interrupted or accused of anything. I have hated myself all my life for this. I was fifteen years old when our school closed for the summer vacation. I was sitting in class with my friends when we heard the final bell ring and we were all excited to leave the school building and start the holidays. As I approached the school gate with my best friend Elle, we heard girls screaming and laughing and it looked like all the boys from the boys' school next door were waiting at our gates with water buckets and water cannons. It was scary at first, with everyone running in a different

direction, and the girls screaming just made it worse. Elle and I ran back inside. We had a secret hole in the school's fence that only we knew about, so we went through it, and luckily for Elle, her dad picked her up every day, so I had no choice but to say goodbye and start my journey home alone. And that's when I met him - your father, Miles. He asked if he could walk me home, and before I could even say yes, he took my books and bag and carried them for me.

"That walk turned into what my dad called Puppy Love, but to me, it was real. We spent the whole summer together. He was funny, handsome, and such a gentleman, it was easy spending all my time with him. Your father came from a rich family, and they were not fond of me, but they couldn't control your father because he was very stubborn. My parents thought he was a snob and they tried everything to keep us apart, but I lied and used Elle's name when I wanted to see him. On one occasion we were in the park near the river; we decided to take a swim and that's when it happened. I obviously didn't know what I was doing but your father was so gentle, and every day after that, we would meet at the river, go for a swim, make love, and he would walk me home. Did I mention your father's name was Miles?" I look up for the first time since I started talking, and Miles Jnr is smiling and listening intently. Even Edward is giving me his full attention, so I continue.

"Miles Snr had an older sister and she liked me. She helped us sneak out and gave us food when we went around to visit her. She was much older than he was, and she was already married but she couldn't have children of her own. I missed my monthly cycle, and I knew something was wrong, so we went to his sister's house, and she made me take a pregnancy test. Miles Snr was waiting for me in another room and when we saw the small positive sign, his sister assured me we would be okay, and she would help where she could.

"We were so excited because we loved each other but were scared too, we knew our parents would make this difficult. Your father said that if my parents didn't accept this pregnancy we should elope. I was assured everything would work out, with his family's money and his sister's help, we would be okay. So Miles told his parents, and the very same evening they came to our house and sat my parents down and told them. My father cried like a baby, but my mother was mean, cold,

and cruel, and she said that I would have to give up the baby because there was no way we could afford this baby and I needed to finish school. They agreed, and this broke our hearts. My parents decided I would miss a year of schooling and after I had the baby, I could return. Miles Jnr and I were dead set on eloping, and our plans were in motion, when one evening his sister called our home and said that Miles had been in a car accident. He went joy riding and celebrating with his friends, and they crashed into another vehicle and a motorcycle. He was with two of his friends, and in the other car were an old lady, Martha, with her granddaughter Sophie.

"I will never forget their names, because that day, they all lost their lives. The crash was so bad there were no survivors. We never got the name of the man on the motorcycle. I cried all the way to the hospital, and when I saw him lying there, it was my undoing. I had just lost the first love of my life. I look up at Edward and he looks so sad, but he hasn't said a word and he hasn't made a sound.

"Months after the accident I had the baby, a boy." I smile and look up at Miles Jnr. "The nurses said I wasn't allowed to name him, and it was my choice if I wanted to see him after he was born, or if I preferred, they would take him away immediately. I begged to see him and I named you Miles Jnr Prescott after your father. I looked into your eyes, and I played with your fingers, and I vowed to love you for the rest of my life, but my mum came in and took you from me and I never saw you again.

"When I turned eighteen, I went looking for you, and this made my parents terribly angry, but I didn't care. I just wanted to know that you were okay, and I needed you to know that I came looking for you. I went to the hospital and adoption agencies, but no one could help me. I spent three months looking for you, and then I received a phone call - I couldn't believe my ears. She told me she had adopted you and I could see you whenever I wanted to, but she couldn't give you back to me. She promised we could have a relationship and I could be in your life daily and watch you grow, and maybe one day when you were older, she would leave it up to you to decide if you wanted to come with me or stay with her. I spent months with you until I started demanding to take you back. I was the right age and I had started working so I knew I stood a chance to get you

back. I wanted you back so badly, so I started asking around for lawyers and for someone to help me. The following week I went back for our weekend visit and the house was empty.

"They had moved. They took you and they left. No trace of you. It broke me, I sat on the pavement in front of the house for hours, hoping they would come back, but they never did. And that's when I met you, Edward, you walked by and asked me if I needed help, and you took me home."

My son interrupts me and asks who adopted him, because he only remembers one family and one home. I tried to avoid telling him this, but he deserves to know.

"Her name was Mel Prescott, better known as Mel Davies, after she married. Your mother is actually your aunt. Mel is Miles' Senior's sister, the one who promised to help me and who ended up betraying me. It took me years to forgive her, it took me forever to understand why she did it. She couldn't have her own children, so you were a blessing to them - her brother's son, flesh and blood; and I knew one day you would come and find me." We all are crying, but tears of relief, tears of joy, tears of betrayal, tears of compassion, when the door opens and Romeo and Dillan are standing there, confused by all the crying and the stranger sitting across from their parents who holds so much resemblance to Romeo. He looks so much like Romeo does and now that they are in the same room, it is easier to see.

Miles Jnr's POV

I am so glad I found my real mother; she told me her story and I believe her. Mel Davies and Keith Davies will always be the people who raised me, and I will love them for it, but Lisa and Miles Snr Prescott are my parents. I am surprised when two young men walk into the house. Lisa tells me they are her sons with her husband Edward. He doesn't look so bad; he seemed angry at first, but I can see he loves Lisa. He seemed so sad every time she cried, and he genuinely cares for her. Romeo, Lisa's eldest son, looks a little like me, maybe because he looks like his mum, and I look like my m... like Lisa.

We are sitting around the dinner table and Lisa gives a much shorter and more condensed story than the one she gave Edward and me, so they understand who I am and what I am doing in their home. Romeo and Dillan still looks a little confused, but they don't say much. We all are eating quietly when I wonder if I should leave now or what the next move is. Lisa suddenly asks me if I need a place to stay, as if she can read my mind. I respond, "Thank you, Lisa and Edward, for opening your doors to me today and serving me a hot meal, but I can't impose any longer. Before coming over I booked a room at the hotel nearby and I can always come back tomorrow if you'll have me. I would like to get to know you all a little better."

Edward: "How long do you plan on staying?"

Miles: "As long as I am welcome, Sir."

Edward: "Obviously staying at the hotel won't make any sense then. I will call them, get your money back, and you can stay in the room next to Romeo's."

Miles: "Thank you, Sir."

Romeo: ''How old are you?"

Miles: "I'm twenty-four."

Dillan: "Do you have a girlfriend?"

Lisa: "Guys, control yourselves."

Dillan: "It's a simple yes or no question, Mum."

Miles: "No. I recently finished my studies and my mum Mel promised me that if I graduated, I could take some time off."

Romeo: "So she knows you came to find your mother?"

Miles: "No, they think I am on a beach tanning somewhere. She never wanted me to find you or reach out. She never spoke about my mother; I didn't even know I was adopted."

Romeo: "What do you mean you didn't know?"

Lisa: "How did you find out about us then, about me?"

Miles: "On my 21st birthday, I overheard them arguing about telling me the truth because my dad thought I deserved to know, but my mother begged him not to tell me. When I walked into the room, they were caught red-handed, so they had to tell me. She showed me photos of the time she allowed you to visit,

and when I asked to see you or meet you, she claimed to not know where you are or who you were. She said it was a closed adoption.

Romeo: "Man, that's bad!"

Lisa: "I am so sorry, Miles. I wish I had done things differently."

Miles: "It's okay, I have found you now, that's all that matters."

Lisa: "Okay, that's enough for one night, Miles. I will see you in the morning." Lisa gets up and walks off to her bedroom.

Miles: "Yes, Ma'am. Goodnight, everyone."

Romeo's POV

Man, I can't believe I have an older brother who looks somewhat like me, it's so odd. My mum said he would be staying with us for a while and he will be joining us on our holiday. It's been a week and we've kinda gotten used to him being around. Damn, I miss Lilly, I haven't seen her for the past week, and tomorrow we leave for Kalk Bay Harbour. I need to see her before we leave. I send my mum a text and I know she will kill me later, but I take my dad's car and drive over to Lilly's. She's home, and when I see her, I feel whole again.

We kiss like I am moving away for good and not just going away for two weeks, but hey, I'm not complaining. I immediately feel sad when I get a reply from my mum, "Romeo, let the poor girl breathe, and come home, we need to finish packing." I laugh and show Lilly the text. She blushes but doesn't say anything; she has been awfully quiet, not that we had much time to speak because our mouths were busy doing something else, but Lilly is never quiet, I can hardly get her to sit still.

"What's wrong, Angel?" She tells me she will miss me, and she is just sad that I am leaving, and she won't see me for two whole weeks. It breaks my heart, and when she walks me to the door, we say goodbye, but I don't want to leave, and I know she doesn't want me to go. I reluctantly walk to the car, and I keep looking back. When I drive off, I see her beautiful face getting smaller and smaller until I can't see her anymore and my emotions change from sad to angry. Yes, I'm angry;

why do I need to go to some stupid beach like I am five years old? I slam the steering wheel. Dammit!

Lisa's POV

Right, everyone is packed and ready to go except Romeo. Where is that child? Edward is fast asleep. Dillan and Miles are in their bedroom playing video games, I love how close they are. Just then I hear the garage and I know Romeo is home; he walks in from the side door, gives me a kiss on my cheek and smiles, I know he is playing me. "I need your bags, Romeo, bring them down to the rest of the luggage." He shouts something about showering first and runs up the stairs. I head to bed, I am exhausted. I can't wait for this holiday; I need a break.

Morning comes so quickly; I see the sun come through the curtains and I fly out of bed. We are supposed to be on the road already, we can't miss our flight. "Eddy, wake up, Darling, we're late!" I run through the house but when I get downstairs the boys are ready and waiting. Romeo sees me and says he was just about to play House music in my bedroom to wake us up. I have no idea what that means but the others are laughing so I assume he wanted to wake us with that racket noise he calls music.

We leave home, on time and in one piece, and everyone is asleep on the way to the airport. I have three amazing sons and one strong, generous husband. I am so blessed to have been given another chance with Miles. The thought brings tears to my eyes, and I can't wait to make up for lost time. I love Edward and I wouldn't trade him for anyone, but I hope that Miles Snr is watching me right now and I hope he is happy that our son found me.

When I open my eyes, we are at the airport, and I don't know when I fell asleep, but I feel rested. We board the plane - we are in first class, this is typical of my husband, and I make sure everyone gets settled and we're off. We land and to my surprise there are two cars waiting for us. Edward explains that he got two cars so the kids can give us some space to relax. Makes sense, they are so busy, and we need the holiday for a break and resting time. We arrive at the house and it's

beautiful. Eddy has been here for business, he says, but this is my first time. The house is next to the beach and you can hear the waves, and there is a big swimming pool outside that fills the back yard, and a large entertainment area. As you enter, there is a wide kitchen area, it's almost as big as my whole first floor. There are four fridges and a big breakfast island, and when I look to my left there is a cosy lounge and open plan tv room; and now it makes sense, these are the only two rooms on the floor. There is a glass door that opens onto the porch and when you step outside it's almost like we are ten feet from the sea. It's breath-taking.

We head upstairs and there is a main bedroom and a servant's quarters. I look at Edward, confused, and ask, "Honey, where will the boys sleep?" He points to the passageway and I see the door only now; when we go through the door there are more stairs that lead us to a studio apartment with three bedrooms, each with its own bathroom, plus a lounge and a small kitchen. It's like the boys have their own house; there is another door with their own entrance and I don't know if I like this, but when I look for my sons they are all shouting with excitement and heading towards their bedrooms. Well, so much for walking your mum to the door.

CHAPTER 11

Miles's POV

Romeo and Dillan are so cool, I have always been an only child and I love having siblings now. They've shown me around and I met some of Romeo's friends, everyone is so nice. A few weeks ago, it broke my heart because I realised how much I had missed, and what I could have had, but I am happy now, I am with them now, and I know that everything happens for a reason. We are at this beautiful resort, and Mr Edward treats me like a son. I wish that somehow, I could show him how much that means to me; one day I will make this up to him. Romeo and I are going clubbing tonight, Dillan has begged to come too but I'm twenty-four, Romeo is twenty-two and Dillan is only seventeen. I told Romeo that we could sneak him in, he is quite tall, but Romeo doesn't want to take the chance. I can't really overstep but I do feel bad for him, so I decide on another approach. I call Dillan to my bedroom and tell him to get dressed, wear something black, and sneak into the car, and once we're there Romeo won't have a choice. I am taking a huge risk, but Romeo is a cool guy, he is only looking out for his younger brother but so am I. The sun sets and we get ready. Romeo is dressed, and I am tying my shoes when he asks me if I have seen Dillan. I know he is already in the car, so I lie and say yes, he went to the takeaway shop and mentioned getting ice cream. We take our jackets and sneak out, we're adults but he doesn't want his parents to know where we are going because apparently Aunty Lisa is a killjoy and she might come to the club to check up on us. That I don't believe but he obviously knows her better. We take the car, drive to the club, and Romeo is deep in thought.

Miles: "What's up, Bro, are you missing Lilly?"

Romeo: "No, don't talk about Lilly tonight please."

Miles: "Okay. You look so nervous, did something happen?" He snaps at me every time I ask about Lilly; what is eating him?

Romeo: "No, but it's about to."

Miles: That was barely a whisper, more like he was talking to himself, and I don't know what the hell that means but he has been in a mood the whole day. He parks the car and just before we get out, Dillan sits up, scaring the shit out of Romeo - and me, because even I forgot he was in the car - but this works in my favour, now Romeo won't believe this was my plan.

Romeo: "What are you doing here, D?"

Dillan: **"**I came to meet some girls; what are you doing here?"

Romeo: "Dillan, this is no time for your smart answers."

Dillan: "You're right, there's no time to act like a granny with no teeth, let's follow those hotties inside."

Dillan points to two sexy, long-legged blondes and gets out of the car, and we follow, it's like we came here with him and not the other way around; this makes me chuckle. He strides pass the bouncers and they don't even look at him. When we pass by, Romeo greets one of the bouncers and I'm shocked, why didn't he want Dillan to come if he knows a bouncer? I walk past him and try to find Dillan. I spot him talking to the two hot ladies, and when I approach, he introduces me. But what he says floors me, I lose my words and end up looking like an idiot:"Ladies, this is my eldest brother, Miles." I stand there staring at him, he just called me his brother. Okay, yes, he has never had to introduce me to anyone before, but when I met Romeo's friends, he just said, "Guys, this is Miles."

The girls start oohing and aahing over me and I snap out of it, and we head to the dance floor when something catches my eye. It's Romeo, with some tall chick. I lean in and ask Dillan, "Hey, who is Romeo with? Over there. Yes, at the bar." Dillan looks over and shakes his head, "That's Amy, his ex-girlfriend from back home."

I wonder what she is doing here and how she knew where he was, or maybe this was just a coincidence, then Dillan answers my unspoken question: "Amy's family is rich. Well, kinda rich, and she always travels and does what she wants; she's an only child. She must've found out he would be here, so she flew down." "Wow, okay, that's interesting, no wonder he was nervous and constantly on his phone." An hour later, we're out of breath and leaning on the bar to get drinks. The ladies danced circles around us. Damn, either I am old or unfit as hell, or maybe it's because I just never did things like this. Dillan laughs at me and after two sips of his beer, he's on the dance floor again.

I need some fresh air, so I go outside and I see Romeo and that Amy chick seriously making out against the car. And then he opens the door and frankly - what it looks like to me - shoves her into the car. I'm frozen, watching this porn movie unfold in front of me, when I feel a hand on my shoulder. It's Dillan, he wants a light for a cigarette. I didn't know he smoked.

Miles: "I didn't know you smoked."
Dillan: "I don't, I just gets crazy sometimes."
Miles: "Well, I don't have a light. Is this something Romeo always does?"

As soon as I ask the question, I feel bad. Romeo is a guy, he is young, and it's not like I haven't been there before; just when I was acting like a horny teenager, I was just that, a teenager. Romeo is a grown man and I have never met Lilly, but from what he has told me, she's amazing. That's another thing, he hasn't stopped talking about Lilly since I met him, so it makes me wonder what tonight's about. Dillan starts in on a story and tells me that Romeo has never had one girlfriend, he's dated multiple women and he has never been faithful, so this doesn't shock Dillan anymore. Romeo is a charmer, and when he gets home, he will talk his way out of this and Lilly will be putty in his hands again. Dillan also says that he tried to stop this before, he has intervened and told on him, but Lilly forgave Romeo anyway. Even though it was years ago, she should've known he wouldn't change, so now Dillan just minds his own business.

Romeo gets out of the car, sees us, and starts shouting that we need to mind our own business. He comes towards us, but he is so angry, surely this can't be a guy who just got laid? He is tense, and he screams at Dillan that this is why he didn't want him to tag along. He keeps approaching us, swearing, and he attempts to grab Dillan, but I step in, "Romeo, man, chill, you're drunk." "This is none of your business, Miles," he says, "I am talking to my brother, my only brother." We end up having a three-way argument with me defending Dillan and Dillan defending me and Romeo swearing at us both. I don't know why he can't see he will lose this fight. That Amy girl comes running and shouts that Romeo needs to stop, but he is like a madman, he pushes her aside and comes right up in my face. I don't know why or how it happened, but my instincts take over and I punch him right in the face, and seconds later I am in the most senseless fight of my life.

Dillan's POV

Man am I glad the bouncers showed up when they did! They were a little biased, just stopping Miles because Romeo is their friend, but eventually they broke up the fight and sent Romeo home with their driver; only he didn't go home, he went to Amy's place. I watched Miles take pictures of him and Amy, yelling he would send them to Lilly and ruin Romeo, but Romeo is a player, he didn't even flinch. I wonder if Romeo ever loved Lilly, if he ever loved anyone. This makes me sad for him. Miles is driving us home and he is quiet. He doesn't have a scratch on him even after all the shots Romeo threw; he is a good fighter too, they both are. It was crazy to watch.

"Hey, man, thank you for defending me back there, but it wasn't necessary, I can handle Romeo," I say. He just nods and gives me a fist pump; it makes me laugh because we are not thugs. I hate other people fighting my battles and I can handle myself; I don't need protection. Man, I can't wait to get home, I'm drunk and tired and I'm glad Romeo won't be there because I know him, this isn't over. At least we leave tomorrow, we can go home and forget about all of this.

Romeo's POV

Dillan and Miles are getting way too close for my liking. I have seen them bonding and doing shit together, but they've never excluded me or acted like arseholes about it, so why start tonight? I am angry and hurt and confused. We get dropped off at Amy's hotel and I know I owe her an apology too. She goes upstairs without saying a word, so I call my mum before I handle this feisty little woman. "Hey, Mum, yes, we're okay. I am sorry to bother you so late, but I met Uncle Michael's sons, and they invited me to stay with them for another week." I know my mum loves her brother so she will never say no if she knows I will be with family. "Yes, Mum… no, they said they would fly me home next week and that I should just let you know. We are going fishing on their boat. Mum, I'm twenty-two, I will take care of myself… yes, okay, love you, goodnight." I hope she doesn't actually call Uncle Michael; my dad would kill me, but I am a grown man, and I don't feel like being around my brothers right now.

I head upstairs and Amy is in the shower, so I decide to join her, we need to blow off steam. I undress and open the shower door and she turns to face me. That's one of the things I like about Amy, she doesn't dwell on the past or nag me. I know she likes it rough, so I choke her and pull her up onto me, we slam against the wall and I lift her so she slides gently onto my penis. All is forgotten, we have sex, get into bed and sleep; my rule is no cuddling and spooning, I hate that shit and she knows that. When I wake up the next morning, Amy is nowhere to be found but there's a note, "I went shopping and for some breakfast, meet me when you're up." I don't feel like seeing her today, so I freshen up and head to the nearest café. I'm starving. I walk into the small café, the whole front of which is a large glass window, and there are small brown leather chairs and wooden tables inside. The wallpaper looks like honeycomb-shaped tiles and there are lights everywhere. The floor is chequered, and it makes one dizzy, and there are small bowls of sugar on the table as well as the breakfast menu. There is only one other customer inside, this place isn't cosy at all.

A waiter approaches me and I don't even look up, I know what I want, so I ask her to bring me their full breakfast and some apple juice; I don't drink coffee or tea. A small voice loaded with authority and attitude tells me they don't have

apple juice, "We only have mango, orange and strawberry." I look up and can't help but smile. She's tiny, her voice is tiny, but she has that 'I don't take anybody's shit' look on her face.' "Make it strawberry then." She walks away and I check her out; she's skinny, long legs and long black hair, and she has an amazing arse. When another waitress brings my food, I'm disappointed, so I ask what happened to the lady who served me? She informs me that she is the owner of the café and was covering for her staff, who appears to be only this young girl with a mouse face and short brown hair. She explains that she was running late. I start eating because I'm not interested and she walks away quietly. When I'm done, I look out of the window and my mind is blank. The owner approaches me again and she asks if everything was okay and if I enjoyed my meal.

Romeo: "What's your name?"
Owner: "I'm Faith, did you enjoy your meal?"
Romeo: "I sure did, but I'm always hungry."
Faith: "We serve lunch as well."
Romeo: "Oh, is that an invitation?"
Faith: "If you would like it to be, come around lunch time; I'll serve you the best burger and chips you've ever had."
Romeo: "Cool, I'll see you at noon."
Faith: "Will someone be joining you? I like to be prepared when you arrive."
Romeo: "No, I'm single."
Faith: "Perfect, so am I."

She walks away and looks back to me at least four times, which means she wants me. I've learnt how to read women over the years: if she looks back once, she's making sure you're looking, twice means she wants you, but four times? Damn! I get up to leave and throw some money on the table when my phone rings. Oh, it's Mum.

Romeo: "Hi, Mum, are you guys leaving now?"
Mum: "Yes, what do you want me to do with your luggage?"

Romeo: "Please leave it at the studio for me, I'll collect it. Cousin Liam will drive me. Travel safe, Mum. Thanks, Mum, and don't worry, I am fine."

I hang up and decide to take an Uber to the studio to collect my things and find a place to stay, when Amy shows up. She just looks at me and says she knows what I'm up to and it's okay, she's leaving anyway. Her dad called and said her mum was ill so she's flying back immediately. She hands me the key and says the room is paid for, and I can stay there for two weeks, and then she kisses me on my cheek and slides into the back of a black car. And with that, she's gone. Why do I feel like I'm never going to see her again? I walk back to the apartment, and I feel great - my own space for two weeks, amazing. I am so busy tidying up, getting my luggage and packing that I almost miss my lunch appointment. When I reach the café, I'm directed to a table and the food is served but Faith is nowhere to be found. I scan the café, and nothing - what is this about? The burger is delicious, and as soon as I take the last bite, Faith is sitting down and smiling. This woman is like a possessed ghost.

Romeo: "I thought we were having lunch together?"
Faith: "No, what makes you think that? I didn't say I would be joining you, I said I would serve you."
Romeo: "Well, you didn't serve me either, so either way, you lied."
Faith: "I can always make it up to you."
Romeo: "And how do you propose to do that?"
Faith: "Fetch me from the café at ten 'o clock tonight when I close up, and I'll show you."
Romeo: **"**I don't trust you anymore. I need a guarantee."

She gets up, grabs my face, and gives me a long kiss; she nibbles on my lips, then slightly bites my bottom lip and that's all the proof I need. I go home, almost in a daze, and I just lie there. My phone rings and I don't check before answering, I just accept the call.

Romeo: "Hello?"
Lilly: "Hi, how are you?"

I jump up; this small, sad voice has pulled out of my daze, this is one call I wasn't expecting, and I know I am in so much trouble. We haven't spoken since yesterday morning, and she will want answers. I try to clear my head and act normal.

Romeo: "I'm good, and you? I miss you, what have you been up to?"

Lilly: "Well, I've just come from Dillan, and I was so excited to see you, but I see you didn't come back with your family. Your mum told me you are with your uncle and I'm glad you are having fun, I just thought you would be as excited as I was to see each other again."

Romeo: "I'll be home soon, Angel. I have to go now; my uncle needs me."

Lilly: **"**Oh okay, goodb…" Did he just hang up on me?

Romeo: I couldn't even say goodbye, I didn't know what else to do. I almost throw my phone against the wall. Why am I mad? it's not like I didn't know I had a girlfriend back home, and this isn't Lilly's fault, but why did she have to call? Dammit!

I need to get my mind off this mess, I need space. This next two weeks is all about me. I am going to clear my head and I think I know just what I need. I need to have faith, faith that things will change and that my life will get better and easier, and things will fall into place. Oh, my word, FAITH!!!!

CHAPTER 12

TWO MONTHS LATER

Lilly: "I can't believe he refuses to come home. We haven't spoken this whole week. I haven't seen him in two months."

Tessa: "Have you tried calling him?

Lee: "Yes, Lilly, I agree with Tessa, you need to call him. Social media will not solve your problems; we have so much miscommunication when it comes to interpreting social media messages. Just call him."

Lilly: "Okay, okay! Umm… here goes nothing." I don't know why but I can't get these thoughts out of my head, something is definitely wrong, and Dillan said he hasn't spoken to Romeo in weeks now. This worries me, and I have such a nervous feeling. He has been there for almost two months already and yip, just as I thought. Voicemail.

Tessa: "And?"

Lilly: "Voicemail." I look down and whisper, "He isn't coming home." Tears are suddenly rolling down my cheeks.

Tessa: "Oh no! I'm sorry, Lil, I'm sure he's just busy, try him again later. Maybe this was just bad timing." I try to think of a way to make her feel better or say something that would help but we all know Romeo, I'm afraid he has hurt her again and there is nothing we can do. I feel the baby kicking and tell Lilly to feel; she looks

up and tries so hard to smile but when the baby kicks again, her smile touches her eyes.

Lee: "OH MY WORD!"

Tessa: "What? Why are you screaming? You nearly gave me a heart attack!"

Lee: "I'm sorry, Lilly."

Lilly: Lee looks at me and I don't understand why she's apologising. "What are you on about?" Lee is so dramatic, she is looking at her phone but doesn't say anything, just that she's sorry and she is making me worry.

Lee: "Romeo just changed his relationship status on social media."

Tessa: "Let me see." I grab Lee's phone so I can make sure before we tell or show Lilly anything.

Lilly: "What does it say? Show me, no, wait - don't show me, just read it."

Tessa: "Are you sure? Lilly, have a look." She shakes her head and motions for me to read it aloud. "Okay, it says, 'In a relationship with Faith Forrest'," I whisper.

LILLY'S POV

I don't know if I heard what Tessa just said or if I actually consciously blocked her out, but Lee grabs her phone back and the look on her face confirms what I just heard; they are asking who Faith Forrest is and they're trying to search for her name on social media to see what she looks like if this is true, and where she's from. I just feel so numb, so hurt, so betrayed, so confused, and I am trying to feel or push myself to anger, but the overriding feeling is pain. I should have expected this, he will never change. I am in my own bubble, and I find myself sitting down on the floor and I can't hear or see anything. It is just me and my broken heart, wondering what I have done wrong.

My heart semi-predicted he would do this to me, but I worked so hard at giving him the benefit of the doubt. I tried so hard to have some faith in him, in us. I

half cry and half laugh at the pun, I had 'faith' in him to never hurt me again, and then he breaks my heart with a woman named Faith.

I sit on my bedroom floor and cry my heart out. There is no sound, no sob, just tears - tears are flowing and flowing, and it doesn't end. Doesn't he understand that I love him? And I know I have never said it to him, but it's always been him for me, I have chosen him over and over again, but this isn't the first time he has cheated on me; after all, I have never been good enough for him. I am so glad my friends are here. They can't do anything, they don't say anything, they both just sit with me and watch me cry for what feels like hours. I wouldn't be able to do this alone, but I hate how humiliated and embarrassed I feel. I hate crying in front of other people, and I hate showing how hurt I am, it makes you look weak. With that thought, I get up and go to wash my face, and when I get back to the bedroom Tessa and Lee say they need to get home and we say goodnight. I love my friends.

I need some time alone anyway and I need to take a shower. When they leave, I know that all I need now is the warm water rushing off my back; I also need to wash my hair, and oh my word, look at my toes, I seriously need a pedicure. After a thirty-minute shower, I feel better. I dress in my pjs and walk down to the kitchen to see what I can eat; I am starving. I burst out laughing because I see Tessa is sitting at the breakfast island eating a sandwich my mum made her and they are in full conversation about the baby that's due next month. I am super excited for her; I know she will be a great mum and Zane has been amazing. He is so supportive and he spoils her; it's nice to see she has found her happiness.

I make myself a sandwich, sit down next to Tessa, and before Tessa really goes home this time, she stands, takes a bite of my sandwich and waves as she leaves. I wave, laugh, and start to fill my mum in on Romeo. She listens carefully while preparing a meal and then calmly responds, "Lilly, you're still so young, you are a first-year student at college and there is just so much time. You need to go out more, make new friends, meet new people, and meet so many frogs before meeting your prince. I always knew you were way more serious about Romeo then he was about you and that's okay, you have a big heart, and you love wholeheartedly. That doesn't make you weak but being strong also means knowing when to walk

away, valuing yourself and knowing how to get up after falling. Now, firstly you need to speak to your father about that thing you want to go to with your friends and use a driver or Uber because I don't want anyone driving under the influence of alcohol, and secondly you need a pedicure." She looks at my toes and smirks and I start laughing, they do need some work. I always feel better after talking to my mum and I decide to take her advice and enjoy being alone for a while.

Lee: My phone rings and I can see it's Lilly. "Hi, come quickly, Tessa is in hospital," she says. I run out of the door just when Lilly pulls up, and we speed off to the hospital. While we are driving, she tells me that Tessa's water broke and she has been having a really tough time with the pain. We get to the hospital, and we wait an hour. Zane was with her when her water broke, and she is very lucky this happened at such a convenient time of day. We hear her crying and screaming every time she has a contraction and I ask Lilly why we can hear her. Lilly lifts her shoulders indicating she doesn't know why, and then we see Tessa's mum. We go over to her, and she says Tessa has been screaming for hours and she is in the first room right near the door where we are standing. She is with Zane, and they are waiting for some news too. Hours pass - yes, hours - and they won't let us see her, but they let her mum in and her mum arranges for them to open the window where the babies are kept. And we see the baby, he is gorgeous. He's so tiny! Well, not really, he is one fat little baby, but he has the tiniest hands, and his cheeks are rosy, his feet are pink, and oh man, he is so adorable. Lilly and I realise at the same time that we didn't even get her a gift or flowers or something for the baby. We're such horrible friends. But he came early and didn't even warn us. I guess that's what babies do, arrive without warning or invitation. There's still time and he is here now, so welcome to this cruel, cruel world, baby Troy Eden.

Lilly's POV

It's been five months now and I spend all my time with our new baby. Tessa and Troy are doing great and they are both so healthy. I received a text from Romeo about three months ago saying he was engaged, and his fiancée was pregnant, so I guess that chapter of my life is over. Lee has been accepted by the University of Stellenbosch and I don't understand why she applied to universities so far away. She had been very quiet and distant and before she left, and I knew something was wrong. I intended to speak to her before she left, but she went without saying goodbye. I made a mental note that after finals I would visit her and make things right. I am seeing a guy casually, his name is Adam, nothing serious, I have only kissed him once and we had a lunch date. I am telling Tessa about some of my plans when my phone rings and it's a number I don't recognise.

Lilly: "Hello?"

Aunty Lisa: "Hi, Lilly, this is Aunt Lisa, Romeo's mum."

Lilly: My heart sinks and my first thought is that I hope Romeo is alright, because she never calls me. "Oh, hi, Aunt Lisa, is everything okay?"

Aunty Lisa: "My dear, I'm uncertain, but I need to speak to you please?"

Lilly: "Okay, no problem, I'm not busy right now." I say this thinking that she wants to have a telephone conversation, but she asks me to come to her house to see her. This is even more serious than I thought.

Aunty Lisa: "Will you come by the house today? Now please, if possible?"

Lilly: "Yes, Aunt Lisa. I will be there in fifteen minutes."

Aunty Lisa: "Thank you, sweet child. I'll see you soon."

I kiss Troy goodbye and explain to Tessa what just happened. She tells me to drive safely because she knows I won't be paying much attention to the road. My mind is spinning, trying to figure out what this conversation could be about. I am driving this familiar road and I suddenly start crying because she is either going to tell me something bad has happened to Romeo or that he is getting married, and I don't know if I am ready to hear either.

I try to calm down as I pull up in their driveway, and Dillan opens up for me. We exchange small talk, and he assures me Romeo is fine because he sees I have been crying. He mumbles he doesn't understand why I care about Romeo after he has hurt me so many times but that wasn't exactly a mumble, I heard every word and maybe I needed to. My emotions shift and I'm so angry or frustrated that I've being sitting worrying about him and he doesn't care about me, so I sit up straight, square my shoulders, and wait for Aunt Lisa. The whole conversation could be about something completely different and that helps me relax. I catch my breath as someone who looks like Romeo walks into the room, but I know Romeo well enough to immediately notice that that's not him, but the resemblance is fascinating. Dillan introduces him to me as his older brother Miles and I know Romeo has told me about him, but we have never met. He is so handsome.

Miles: "The famous Lilly. I feel like I know you so well."

Lilly: I immediately know I'm in trouble, this one's a charmer. He flashes me a million-dollar smile. "Hi Miles, it's great to finally meet you. I've heard so much about you too."

Miles: "Must have been all bad things if it came from Romeo."

Lilly: *What does that mean?* I think to myself. "Not really, I don't recall most of the conversations that were about you."

Miles: "Feisty little one, aren't you? I can understand Romeo's obsession, anyway. If you don't remember the things Romeo told you about me, maybe we need to fix that. Would you like to go out with me tonight, grab some burgers?"

Lilly: What does he mean Romeo's obsession, Romeo clearly can't be obsessed with me? And did he just ask me out? Why am I having a whole conversation in my head? "You do know I am your BROTHER's ex-girlfriend, don't you?"

Miles: "That doesn't mean we can't be friends, Lilly. Dillan will come with us, right Dillan?"

Dillan: "Oh hell no. I am not risking Romeo finding out and coming home just to kick my arse."

Lilly: These two clearly don't know how little Romeo cares about me or what he has done. "Romeo doesn't care about me as much

as you two are making it seem. He has been gone for almost a year now and Miles says he is obsessed and now you're saying he would come all the way home to defend my honour." I still want to lift my hands to emphasis air quoting when they both start laughing, like really laughing. Dillan laughs at me and shakes his head and Miles tries to talk while laughing but he can't manage. Eventually he says, "Oh, you are a poor silly little girl," and they go off laughing again. This isn't funny. I get angry and I am just about to let them have it when I hear….

Aunty Lisa: "Hey, boys, stop that. What's the matter with you two? Lilly, are they making fun of you?"

Lilly: "No, Aunty Lisa." Honestly, I don't know, but it seems senseless ruining their fun; at least my relationship with Romeo brings them some joy. My life is a joke, I scoff to myself.

Miles: "Okay, I'm sorry, I will see myself out."

He winks at me before he leaves me alone with Mrs Kale and my nerves are back. She sits down next to me, and she starts crying like I have never seen before, and then I start crying like I know what she's crying about, but I don't. The day has just been so emotional. After we've both cried enough, she smiles and says, "Well, that was much needed," and all I can do is nod and laugh at myself.

Aunty Lisa: "Lilly, I feel like I've lost my son. I spoke to him today and he sounded so distant and sad, and I know he feels like he just can't come home, he has too much pride. I tried speaking to him and he kept saying he was okay, and I didn't have to worry, but every other sentence or two, he would ask me how you were and say he missed home. He kept asking and saying over and over, I miss MY HOME, I MISS MY HOME, and I didn't understand until we ended the conversation, then I remembered something and that's why I called you. I need your help. Before we left for our holiday, Romeo wrote me a letter, explaining to me how he loved me and how he accepted Miles and didn't blame me for anything, so I assumed the letter was about Miles showing up

out of the blue and it was a big adjustment for all of us, but the letter also said… umm… the letter…"

Lilly: I take her hand because she can barely speak, and she hands me the letter. I read the whole thing and its exactly what she's told me, but the last paragraph is about me.

I read it slowly and I try to open my eyes wider because I think I am hallucinating:

"Mum, I think I am falling in love with Lilly, she's amazing and sweet and I have known her for most of my life and yet I have never met anyone like her. Working away from home so many years ago had become so difficult and that's why I chose to come back, because of Lilly. I thought it would help that I could see her, even when we weren't 'together', but then I couldn't stand being so close to her knowing she wasn't mine, so I called her brother and arranged a visit. When I got to the stadium where he told me she would be, it was like seeing an angel, I FELT AT HOME. I was at peace. I knew that I needed to do everything in my power to get Lilly back and I was lucky that she gave me another chance. I just wanted you to know that I was happy. Lilly brought me HOME. She is my HOME.

Love Romeo.

I am sobbing, and I look up and hand his mum the letter. I don't understand why she showed me this, but I am glad to know that I meant a little more than I thought I did.

Aunty Lisa: "Lilly, I'm dying, I am sick, they don't know. Miles, Romeo, and Dillan don't know, nobody does, only Uncle Edward, so I hope you will at least consider what I am about to ask you. For me, for Romeo and maybe for the two of you, I don't know, that will be your choice, but will you help me bring my son home?"

CHAPTER 13

Romeo's POV

Things between Faith and me progressed so fast, and I think, now that I've gotten to know her, that she's crazy. We are lying in bed, and I like that she has her own place, her own restaurant, and a job, but she is very clingy. She makes me take her to work every morning and fetch her in the afternoons. Damn, 'high maintenance' is an understatement. I get up to shower and get ready to start my day and I know I have decisions to make. My mum keeps calling me, crying and nagging for me to come home. They finally figured out that I wasn't with my uncle so I came clean and said I met someone, and I will come home but when I am ready, but it's already been five months that I've been away. I took leave from work but they have also lost their patience and my manager decided that I should work remotely until next year so I have only a month left and I will either be moving back home with a job, or I'll be unemployed - so decisions, decisions.

When I come out of the shower, Faith has my phone, and she knows how I hate that. I respect her privacy and I want her to respect mine. I have said over and over, "Don't touch my personal things", and another issue I have with her is she never listens. "Get ready, I need to take you to work so I can come back and sort out a few things."

She gets up and she tries to act like she wasn't just caught doing something that I have told her a thousand times not to do. I tell her to hurry and when she's in the shower I check my phone, and nothing seems out of place. An hour later, I've

taken her to work and called my boss, we talk for twenty minutes and after lying about my grandfather being ill and all the other bullshit I fed him over the last few months we make plans for my return, and I know I won't keep the promises I am making. I just don't want to go back, there is nothing there for me, and maybe I should start looking for a job this side and just make the commitment and move. I dread what I am about to do but I call my mother. She cries again but I promise to visit and maybe that will give her some peace and it will give me some clarity, but deep down I know it will kill me to see Lilly again. She is all I can think of. I have called Faith by Lilly's name on numerous occasions, but Faith has never made mention of it, she just ignores it when it happens. I try to hint to my mum how much I miss Lilly, hoping she would bring her up or tell me how's she's doing or if they've even seen her, without me having to ask, but she just warns me that if I don't come home, she will come to me and drag me back. I joke with her and tell her she isn't strong enough; she will need to use force to bring me home, and we end the call on a good note. I hate lying to her, but my mum is relentless.

I start my day; I work a little and I clean my office space up. By four o clock, I go to pick up Faith. When I get there, she sends me a text to come in because she has some files she needs to bring home and she needs my help carrying them. I walk inside and all the ladies are smiling at me, and others are congratulating me. I see Faith and walk to her office with a confused look on my face. Her colleagues are acting weirdly, they know me, I've been here before, so why are they smiling at me and congratulating me? I ask Faith if she has any idea, but she ignores me, rushing to pile the files onto, me and says we should leave. She looks exhausted, maybe she had a busy day. When we get into the car, she keeps looking out of the window and I think she's ignoring me. Maybe I did something wrong…..again? I roll my eyes, but I need to ask anyway.

Romeo: "What's wrong, Faith?"
Faith: "What do you mean?"
Romeo: "You look worried or something."
Faith: "No, I'm fine!"
Romeo: "Did you have a bad day?" now she just stares at me. I am starting to feel anxious, and I don't like this feeling. I'll wait her out

so I just keeping looking at her while trying to watch the road at the same time.

Faith: "Romeo, stop, stop looking at me, watch where you are going."

Romeo: Now she's giggling, and it is making me even more angry. Why do I get such frustrating women? I always have to be stern or put my foot down. "Faith, speak! I am not going to ask you again."

Faith: "Okay, okay, but please promise me you won't get mad."

Romeo: "I'm listening, what's wrong?" I am already mad.

Faith: "Nothing's wrong and nothing happened to me, but about three months ago, I told Lilly that I was pregnant and that we were engaged, and this morning while you were in the shower, I saw your phone. I saw Lilly was online, I was insecure because you still had her as a contact and I wanted to see if she responded or if you guys were still speaking because you are always calling me by her name. She didn't respond to me then, and today when I got to work, I was still worried and nervous because you hadn't mentioned it so I wondered if she had maybe responded to you and you just didn't tell me, and you guys were still speaking behind my back. So today I decided to tell the gossip queen at work that you proposed. Everyone was so happy for me and I liked the attention so I didn't fix anything or tell anyone that I was just joking or lying for the last three months, and I'm sorry."

Romeo: I slam on the brakes and now I'm furious. "You did what?" I am so mad, I can't even think right now, the only thing I know I need right now is to get away from Faith. I get out of the car and just start walking; Faith wants to follow me, but she also doesn't want to leave her car, so she runs back and starts to drive after me. I walk onto a path, and I know she won't be able to follow me. I see a shop and I don't even know why I stopped here so I look around and see the cigarettes. I used to smoke, then I stopped because Lilly didn't like it. Lilly. I wonder what she thinks of me. I buy a whole pack of cigarettes and now I can't stop thinking about her. What is she doing? How is she? How did she take the news of my imaginary engagement and the fake pregnancy? Dammit, Faith! I am smoking one cigarette

> after another; what was Faith thinking? I punch the wall and just continue walking and then I remember, yes Faith used my phone, maybe I can see what Lilly said? I search through my phone, but she must have deleted it. But then I remember that she said Lilly didn't even respond, and I obviously didn't get a reply or I would have rectified the story.

I walk to the park near to Faith's place and I find a park bench. I unlock my secret folder on my phone containing pictures of Lilly, I am surprised Faith hasn't found this. I look at the pictures, one where she's laughing, some where she's serious, then only about a thousand of us kissing, and a few that she wasn't aware I was taking. I miss her and I know I have broken her heart so many times she will never take me back and I know she will never forgive me. I have been keeping tabs on her and every week or so I call Dillan and ask about Lilly. He told me she was seeing someone and that about broke me and since then I couldn't see myself going back. I speak to Miles now and then, we've made peace and he let slip that he hasn't met her so I know she hasn't been to my parents' house. I am secretly glad Lilly and Miles haven't met, that would be weird, after all, he is her type, he is tall and he is a little muscular and I know what Lilly likes. I hate that she thinks I am engaged and having a baby. I hate that I didn't know if she was sad. Did she cry? If she didn't reply, then maybe she didn't care.

When I see these pictures of her, they make me feel differently, I'm no longer angry, I don't even feel lost or confused or all the other emotions that have been eating at me. Lilly has always been there, whether I messed up or did something that made other people want nothing to do with me, it didn't matter. Lilly has always been consistent, and it didn't matter to her if I wanted to be a lawyer or a farmer, if I had a car or if I walked to her, if I had money or only the clothes I was wearing, she's just always been there. She's loved me at my worst, and I let her down, I messed up and broke her heart, over and over and over again. I've never quite looked at her without lust or wanting something from her; even if it was just advice, I knew she would be honest with me. If I think about it, she's the only girlfriend I had who didn't care if I laid down the law, put my foot down, shouted, raised my voice, or tried to be stern with her. She would challenge me and take me on there and then. She would stomp her tiny foot with her hands on

her hips and rip me a new one about respect and acting like a grown man. I smile when I think about her amazing qualities and I laugh out loud when I think of the day so many years ago when I told her I loved her while she was sleeping. I almost had a panic attack thinking she had heard me, and I wonder what all this means. I should have known then, was it a sign? The question plays in my head over and over again and I realise that yes, I miss her, I miss her…. And suddenly it feels like someone or something flung ice-cold water all over me. I'm awake, out of my daze and I'm cold. I'm shaking, and I have this urgent need to run.

I sit up and look around and my heart is filled with the deepest realisation, and I know what I need to do and where I need to be. I want to be with her for the rest of my life, I need to fix things and I will spend eternity making it up to the woman who has captured my heart when she was only nine years old. Why have I never thought about this before?

I need to go home.

I love her.

I love Lilly!

I get up to run home and I mean run; I am running because I can't get there fast enough. I take the stairs two at a time, and when I unlock the door, I bump into Faith. She looks at me all panicked and asks me if everything is okay. I try to catch my breath and I tell her I'm leaving but she doesn't understand. I walk past her to the bedroom and start throwing all my things into a big bag, there is no time to pack. She realises that I want to leave, like forever, and she starts crying and begging me to stay. She is crying so hard that I stop, I can't leave like this. I can't leave another woman hating me, my *karma* needs to end with Faith. I take her by her arms and lead her to the bed, I will calm her down and we can talk but I am going back to Lilly, and even if she doesn't want me, I will wait for her to be ready and I will work for her to forgive me, and I will spend my entire life fighting for her love.

Faith and I talk for an hour, and she asked me to sleep on it and if I still feel the same way in the morning, I can leave. I decide to entertain the idea, but I know I have made up my mind, so what can one night hurt? She falls asleep and I go outside to smoke when my phone rings and I have to shake my head and open my eyes, then close it and then open it again because I can't believe what I am seeing, it's Lilly.

Lilly's POV

I am sitting at home; this day has been far too emotional, but Aunt Lisa has never asked me for help before and I want to help her, even if it's just for her sake. Maybe I can manipulate the situation and ask Romeo to come home for me but once he is here, I will remove myself again and they can convince him to stay. How did this become my problem? Why am I even considering this, do I want to call him? Oh, I know it's because Aunt Lisa played the terminal card on me. Maybe I just want to hear his voice, that's not so bad, is it? What if he is with his fiancée, and what if I call him and he rejects the call, or worse, rejects me? Somehow after what Dillan said I don't think he would. Oh my word, why haven't I thought about this… revenge! I could call him, tell him to come home and then get my revenge. Yes, that's exactly what I will do. I'll make him think he would be coming home, and we could try again, but then I could cheat on him with Adam and make him feel what I felt when he broke my heart.

I sit up and I see it's quite late, but I know he is up. I dial his number and it rings. My stomach is turning, and I feel like it's the first day of grade school. He answers on the second ring and once I hear his voice, I know I won't take revenge on him, that's just not who I am, I could never hurt him that way. Romeo stole a piece of me that I know I would never get back.

Romeo: "Lilly? Is that you?"
Lilly: "Hi, yes, it's me."
Romeo: "How are you? Are you okay? Has something happened?"
Lilly: "Yes, I'm okay thank you; I am sorry for calling this late."

Romeo: "No, no, it's okay." I am so nervous. I wonder why she's calling. Could she sense that I needed her, that I want to come home, did she know? Did Faith do something again? I run upstairs while exchanging small talk with Lilly and check on Faith, she's fast asleep, so I check her phone and make sure she didn't call or text Lilly.

Lilly: "You're sure I'm not disturbing you? You sound busy." I don't know how to start this conversation; I can't just say come home. Why did I call? I feel like an idiot.

Romeo: "Lilly, I know I've made mistakes, so many of them, but I will never be too busy to speak to you when you need me."

Lilly: "I just wanted to say congratulations, umm… on your engagement."

Romeo: "Oh, umm about that…. Lilly I'm sorry."

Lilly: "Romeo, I am genuinely happy for you, you don't need to be sorry. As long as she makes you happy."

Romeo: "Just give me a chance to explain. I want you back."

Lilly: I think I fainted or blacked out or my phone is playing tricks on me. I remain quiet; what do I say? Did he just say he wants me back? That doesn't make any sense. I find myself smiling.

Romeo: "Are you there?"

Lilly: "Yes, I'm still here."

Romeo: "Please Lilly, take me back, just give me another chance."

Lilly: "Come home and I'll consider it." There, I said it.

Romeo: "Okay. I will be home tomorrow."

Lilly: I end the call because there is nothing left to say. If I know Romeo as well as I say I do, then I know he won't be home tomorrow. The call wasn't that bad, I think. He sounds the same. I smile when I think of him but at the same time tears roll down my face because I know that as much as I love him, if I let him in, he will break my heart again and I don't know how much more I can take. Will I be able to handle another heartbreak? I go into a panic attack because I'm crying, and I feel like I can't breathe, and I decide to take a walk outside. I have a short, pink, silk nightdress on but there is no one outside,

no one will see me, and I am not going beyond the gates, so I don't need to change. The fresh air hits my face just the right way and I stop crying. I take a deep breath with my eyes closed and I just stand there.

Lilly….

I hear my name and it gives me a fright; I squint my eyes so I can see who else is with me.

"Who's there?"

It's me…. Miles.

CHAPTER 14

William's POV

It's Friday night and I am home, lying in bed with my son, Tyler. He is amazing. He is almost six months old now and Nisha and I are so blessed, I will always be grateful that Nisha gave me this handsome baby boy, but lately, something has been vastly different between us. She's never home, she is always at gym, and she claims she wants her body back. I think it's too soon. We live together and I want to propose but the timing just feels like it's moving faster than usual, and we are living two separate lives. I want to take Ty to my mum tomorrow; she has been begging to see him and I think it will be nice to just have a family day. I hope Lilly will be there, she is such a grown-up lately and it annoys me; it feels like she doesn't need me anymore, and Marsha is now in high school. I smile when I think about Marsha. She is the complete opposite of Lilly. She is quiet, has no friends and is a complete nerd. Ty has finally fallen asleep, and I see it's already nine o' clock and it's getting late. The gym closes at nine, where is Nisha? I call her but she doesn't answer, and I am getting frustrated that I have to call after her every damn night. I make fresh bottles for Ty and go take a shower. If she isn't home by the time I get out of the shower, I will find her, I am tired of this; this ends tonight.

About ten minutes later, I hear the door and I know she's home; I get out of the shower as she walks into the bedroom and she just says hi and starts undressing for a shower. But this can never do. I am so angry, but I try and keep a calm tone when I start the conversation.

Will: "Why did you leave gym so late, Nisha?"

Nisha: "Will, please, I'm exhausted."

Will: "Please what? Do you know how dangerous it is out there?"

Nisha: "Don't babysit me, don't nag me."

Will: "Nag you? Oh, so caring about your safety is now babysitting and nagging?"

Nisha: "You're not caring, you want to monitor the time I leave and the time I get back."

Will: "Hello, we are in a relationship, we have a son. It's important to know where his mother is and if she's okay."

Nisha: "Oh, please, don't use Ty as an excuse for your jealousy and over-protectiveness."

Will: "Nisha, Baby, listen. I don't want to fight, I just wanted us to spend time together please."

Nisha: "So what? So, you can make me pregnant and fat again? I don't think so."

Will: "Have you lost your damn mind? What are you actually saying?"

Nisha: "I AM SAYING I AM NOT GOING TO SPEND THE DAMN WEEKEND WITH YOU AND THAT SPOILT BRAT YOU CALL A SON."

Will: She puts her hand in front of her mouth as if she didn't mean to say that and starts crying. She falls to her knees, and I can see she is exhausted, and I feel sorry for her, so I try to go to her and just hold her.

Nisha: "DON'T TOUCH ME, WILL."

Will: "Nisha, we have to talk, what's going on? You know you can tell me anything, did something happen, are you feeling depressed, Baby?"

Nisha: "Please, please can you just leave me for the weekend and take Ty to your mum? You can stay there for the weekend too. I just need a break."

Will: "Sure, whatever you need."

I leave the room and start to pack. She broke my heart into a million pieces and what's worse is that I can see she's sad, I can see she's tired and I can see she

needs time to herself, but why wouldn't she just talk to me and let me help her? It's okay, I know this isn't about me and I am going to try, really try to not be selfish right now. I call my mum and tell her to prepare for a sleepover; I feel like a teenager again and my mum is clearly excited to see her grandson more then she is to see me because she says Ty could sleep with her, I don't need to watch her with him. I laugh it off and just say we will be there shortly. When I am done packing and loading the car, before I go to pick Ty up from his warm bed, I go once more to the bedroom, but Nisha is in the shower. When I tell her I'm leaving she just says, "*Ja*, okay." I take my son and put him in his car seat, and we head out. The drive is probably the best thing that I could be doing right now. I have the music on, softly, obviously for Ty, but I am singing along, and the road is quiet; this gives me some much needed me-time too.

We reach my parents' house, and all the lights are still on. John comes to help me with bags, and I haven't seen him in so long, I make small talk. This man has lived with us since I was born. You can see his age through his eyes, and I smile when I think how my mum would always say, "John is such a kind man - when you look into his eyes, you see his pure soul." He tells me his wife Millicent is preparing the spare bedroom for me. They met here, his wife Millicent was - or is, I'm not sure anymore - Lilly and Masha's nanny. Yes, okay, and mine. It is a beautiful love story. They have a son, his name is Wesley, named after my dad. John always says my parents did so much for them and for Wesley Jnr that it only felt right to name him after my dad.

Millicent comes out and scolds me, "William, why is this poor baby outside in the cold this late?" She takes Ty from me and doesn't even give me a chance to explain that he is covered with a blanket and I had the heater on in the car, she just gives John a stare and goes inside, making me feel like I am twelve again. John and I giggle, and he just shakes his head. "Guess it's the motherly instincts in her," he says. You see, my issue is that Nisha has never faffed over Ty like that, it is as if she gave birth to a stranger, and she hasn't been herself since. I am worried about her and make a mental note to try to get her professional help; maybe this is more serious than I am making it out to be. We go inside and Marsha is always happy to see me, but she doesn't hug me like she usually does, and my mum says she's getting older now, I should leave her alone. I think it's the female

monthly problem she's run into because she is eating chocolate while in her pyjamas and very ugly, thick, pink socks, and walking around with a blanket. I ask my mum where Lilly is, and she informs me that Lilly has been to see Aunt Lisa today and she has been very emotional since she's been back. I like Romeo and I think they would be great together, but he always finds a way to break her heart. I tried to stay out of Lilly's business because she has asked me to and she's a grown woman now, but he needs to make up his mind because this time I am not minding my own business, friends or not.

"Mum, isn't Romeo in the Western Cape or something? How is he still making Lilly emotional?" My mum fills me in but she's whispering and pulling faces and making voices like it's a tv soapy she's telling me about. I feel like my mum is adding her own spice to this story, she is enjoying this way too much. She even says that my father wants to have Romeo's head and hang it in his office. I try to hide my smile, and when she finishes, she says, "We all know Lilly is your father's favourite; that boy had better watch his back." She shakes her head and then she speaks normally again, and asks me how I am doing, and where Nisha is, and why I am there - all in one go. We speak for about an hour and I am starting to feel sleepy, then my mum makes an indecent proposal, but one I like:

Mum: "Why don't you go home, my son?"

Will: "Mum, are you not happy that I am visiting for a change? You always complain that I'm never here..."

Mum: "I am happy that you are here, my son, but clearly something is wrong, and I can see that it's between you and Nisha."

Will: "How did you know?" How do mothers always know these things?

Mum: "Because I am your mother, William. One thing I know is that, as a woman, if I were Nisha, I wouldn't want to be alone right now, and managing a new-born baby is difficult. Trust me."

Will: "She wanted some alone time, Mum."

Mum: "She needs a break from being a mum, go show her what it's like to still be a woman."

Will: "Mum!" I am shocked that my mother would suggest….

Mum: "Oh please, grow up."

Will: You know, my mum is right, she generally is. I excuse myself from the table and tell my mum to look after Ty and that I will see her in the morning. I wink, and she laughs. I get in my car and drive home to my beautiful, soon-to-be fiancée. I take out the ring I have been keeping in my pocket for almost two months now and I decide that tonight is the night. I will light candles and pour her some wine, and we can do whatever she wants. If she wants to lie in bed and watch tv or make love or go out to a club, then that's what we will do, but one thing I want to do tonight is to make her my fiancée.

I pull up outside and try to be as quiet as possible; I don't want to scare her and I don't want to make her angry by coming in making a huge noise if she is sleeping already, so I am treading carefully. I open the door and all the lights are off and my spirit dampens. Shit, she's already asleep. Ah well, I'll join her, and we can have breakfast in bed tomorrow, she needs to rest. I hang up my keys and take off my jacket, and the sound of something breaking scares the shit out of me. I run to the bedroom praying that she didn't get hurt and I am stopped in my tracks by sounds of giggling and a male voice. I stand at the door of my bedroom, in the house I share with my girlfriend, the mother of my son, and I am rooted in the same spot for I don't even know how long until the numbness disappears, and another emotion takes over, an emotion I know all too well: anger!

I almost break down the door and she is on the bed, on her knees, wearing her sexy, silky nightdress and she's smiling. She is smiling until she sees me. I don't acknowledge the half-naked man standing in my room, not just yet. This is not the same woman who lost her mind at me and at our son two hours ago.

Will: "What the fuck is going on?"

Nisha: "What are you doing here?"

Will: "Did you just ask me what the fuck I am doing in my own house?"

Nisha: "Will, please, let me explain!"

Will: She starts to get off the bed and grab a robe, but it's too late to cover up now. "Who is he?"

Nisha: "Will."

Will: "NISHA, WHO THE FUCK IS HE?"

Nisha: "His name is…. "

Will: "I didn't ask for his name, who is he?"

Nisha: "What do you mean who is he if you don't want his name, William?"

Will: "I mean who is he to you, Nisha? is he your lover, your boyfriend, a prostitute?"

Nisha: "He's my friend."

Will: "Oh, your friend, wow, okay…" I turn to face this foreign creature standing in my bedroom who keeps his head down, and I have been screaming and swearing but he didn't even dare defend Nisha. What type of man is this? "GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY HOUSE." He grabs his clothes and runs the other way around Nisha, past the laundry basket, and he is really trying his best to avoid me. If I weren't this angry, this shit would be funny. He is eventually out of the door and doesn't even greet her, and it breaks my heart that she would be with someone who couldn't even protect her or at least defend her.

Will: "Is that the type of man that makes you happy, Nisha? The type of man who couldn't protect you or defend you, or even say goodbye when he left? He couldn't stand up to me, he couldn't even try. That's the type of guy who has you questioning being a mum and calling your son names and walking out on me, your home, your family?"

Nisha: "William, I was confused, I was so unhap…"

Will: "YOU COULD'VE COME TO ME, NISH!"

Nisha: "HOW, WILL? HOW? This is how we talk to each other, we shout, and we scream when you don't like what I am saying, you raise your voice. How am I supposed to come to you?"

Will: "Nisha, please don't turn this on me. It would be so selfish and unfair. I have never raised my voice to you, I gave you everything, I loved you."

Nisha: "Loved?"

Will: "Yes, Woman, loved. What do you think will happen after this conversation?"

Nisha: "Are you leaving?"

Will: I nod my head and I walk out; I grab my keys and I hear her behind me. "Nisha, I'm leaving, don't follow me. I am going to my mum, and I am fetching my son. When I get back here tomorrow morning, I want you out of my house. Call your man and tell him to help you pack. Don't you dare spend the night in my bed with that guy. It's over. I pick up my jacket and the ring falls out of the pocket, shit!

Nisha: "Is that for me?"

She bends done and grabs the box before I can take it from her and opens it; she sees the ring and starts crying.

Nisha: "Is this for me?"

Will: "It was."

I take the box from her and walk out of the house and close the door behind me. When I get to my car, I throw my jacket on the seat beside me and drive back to my mum's place to see my son, and to try to get some sleep. I am fine the whole way over; I try not to think about what I've just seen. I just drive and focus on what will be next for me now. But when I get to the front of my parent's place, I stop and I don't go in, I'm not ready yet. I sit in the car, turn off my engine and turn off the lights and I don't know why, but I cry. I cry my heart out because I don't understand where I went wrong. I gave her everything she ever wanted. Then I hear a knock on my window. I quickly dry my tears and try to gain composure. When I look up to open the window, I see a shadow, but it's so dark I can't see who it is. I know John is watching the car and he obviously knows who this is, or he would be here now, so I'm not too worried. I open my window and a small voice asks me if I'm okay? I take a closer look and she removes the hood from her head, and my oh my, she is as beautiful as I remember. "Hi, Lee."

Lee: "Are you okay?"

William: "Hi, Lee."

Lee: "Hi, Will, I saw you pull up and recognised your car and I didn't see you get out, so I was worried. Why didn't you pull up in the driveway? Is everything okay?"

William: "Are you keeping tabs on me?"

Lee: "No, silly, I'm here, visiting my parents," I point to my parents' house; they've have lived right next door to Will and Lilly my entire life; I continue, saying, "and like the parents they are, they sent me to the shop to get milk so I can make them some tea."

William: "Are you in a hurry? Come around to the passenger's side and get in, let's catch up."

Lee: "Sure, open up for me."

William: I jump out because I just remembered my manners. I walk around the passenger's side with her and open her door. She smiles at me, and I know this must be the rebound playing with my head, but she is even more beautiful than I remember. She has lost some weight and she is firm in all the right places; her hair is longer than before, but she is as short as I remember. I smile back, close her door, and run back round to my side. When I get into the car, I turn the heat up and she removes her jacket. Lord, why did she remove her jacket? She has the tightest dress on, it's a nude colour and she almost looks naked. My dick responds rudely to this dress, and I don't know if I can sit with her much longer, but I've just invited her in so clearly this is going to be an awfully long and uncomfortable chat.

Lee: "Are you just going to stare at me all night, or are we going to 'catch up?' How are you and Nisha, and, oh man, how is Ty? Lilly sent me pictures of him, he is so beautiful."

William: "Thank you, Lee, he is great, I couldn't have asked for a better son. As for myself and Nisha, it's over, technically it ended tonight; that's why I was just sitting out here."

Lee: "I'm so sorry, Will." Man, he is so handsome.

William: "It's okay. Fill me in on your life, how are the studies going, and is there a new boyfriend?"

Lee: "There was, but it also ended, like two days ago, and that's why I'm here, I ran." I can't help but laugh at myself. "So, you want to have a drink with me? I'll make my parents some tea, and evidently, they converted my bedroom into a library, so I am sleeping outside in the cottage. I have a bottle of whisky."

William: "Lee, that would be great, just what I need."

Lee: "Go park your car and you can just walk over; I'll meet you out back."

William: She jumps out of the car and her small body disappears. I am certain this is a bad idea but it's only drinks, right? Who am I kidding? This is going to be a disaster. I go to park my car, tell John I will be next door, and he shakes his head and laughs at me, and I don't blame him, I am an idiot. With my hands in my pockets, I open up Lee's gates and walk straight to the cottage. When I knock, she opens and asks me to make a fire for us. She is pouring our drinks and I see her legs. *Dammit, Lee*, I think to myself, *that dress is too short*. We end up getting wasted, sharing stories, and laughing most of the night. The fire is keeping us warm and the light from the flames shines at just the right angle and it hits the side of her face, she is beautiful. She gets up to refill our glasses but stumbles a little and we laugh. I decide to help her, but I can barely walk myself. When I find my feet and manage to balance myself, Lee is standing right in front of me; she lifts herself on her toes and comes so close, I can taste her. I forget my manners, my composure, and everything else and I grab her. I kiss her with all the passion I have left in me. When we come up for air, I don't let her go.

William: "I am going to tell you something, okay?"

Lee: I nod and try not to laugh; we are so wasted.

William: "First, this dress is fucking sexy, and you can't wear it again, ever! And second you have great fucking breasts."

Lee: My smile leaves my face and the atmosphere in the room changes, I reach around and unzip my dress and peel it off me, exposing my naked body. His mouth drops open and I can't

help but blush. I lead him to where we made a comfortable sitting place, in front of the fireplace, and we sit down. I lie back and pull him with me, I am flat on my back. We kiss and I place my hand on his pants and his bulge scares me a little. He is so big in my hands, and suddenly he takes both my hands and pulls me over so I am on top of him. I lean down to kiss him, and my hair falls on his face and he reaches up and gently pushes my hair away. He sits up with me on him and my hands are on his biceps, keeping my balance. He takes one of my nipples in his mouth and slowly kisses the other one. I throw my head back when he starts sucking on one side and I feel like I am on fire. He slowly lifts me up and puts me back down on him. I don't even know when he unzipped his pants, and he is inside of me. He pulls my chin down and stares right into my eyes, into my soul. I have never felt this close to anyone in my life. I move slowly and we make love, pure love, with the fire burning, and from somewhere deep inside me, I fall over and quiver. I come in silence while holding his arms, and with just one thrust, he finds his own release.

CHAPTER 15

Romeo's POV:

I am so wound up; I am finding it difficult to sleep but eventually I doze off. I wake up again at 3am and this sofa is really uncomfortable. It is still dark outside, but it's time. I write Faith a note and decide to take a shower but just then my phone rings. It's such an odd hour that I am immediately worried when I see Dillan's name. I answer the call, panicked, and I cringe when I hear he is out of breath and sounds worried.

Romeo: "Hey, man, are you okay? What's up?"

Dillan: "Hey, sorry, let me catch my breath."

Romeo: "Is everyone okay at home? You are making me worry."

Dillan: "No, chill, man, everyone is good. I have just been running."

Romeo: "Why the fuck are you running at 3am?"

Dillan: "Yo! Rome, I met someone!"

Romeo: I burst out laughing. "So why are you running?"

Dillan: "Her dad caught us doing the dirty in her car."

Romeo: Now I am really laughing; I am so glad he called me and not Miles. "So why are you calling me, D?"

Dillan: "I needed to tell someone about this chick, I knew you'd be up. I heard Lilly called and you are coming home? Is that true?"

Romeo: "Yeah, I was just about to shower and leave."

Dillan: "Cool, so I'll see you tomorrow?"

Romeo: "Yes but tell me about this girl."

3 DAYS AGO

DILLAN'S POV:

I decide to take a walk, it's Sunday morning and my parents don't want to go to church; we haven't been in a while. So, I shower, dress up, and walk down to the chapel that has been in our area forever, but we have never been to it. My dad always says it's better to attend where people don't know you, there is less judgement. He always thought people were after his money. When I get to the chapel, I see there is a small coffee shop, a big stage and over one hundred chairs. There is a Sunday school room and a room for babies. They are well set up, much bigger than our old chapel, and with so many people I don't feel so alone and out of place. An older man comes up to me and tells me they only start in thirty minutes, and I can make myself at home. I decide to go get a coffee while I wait. That's when it happened, that's when I saw her, and that's when I knew I was totally screwed. She is beautiful; she walked up to the counter and asked me what I wanted. I almost said, 'YOU!' but I didn't; close call though. I ordered a coffee and tried my best to act normal, but I knew I was only fooling myself; I was practically drooling. She smiled, handed me my coffee and I paid. When I sat down, I watched as people were coming in and exchanging pleasantries, everyone was friendly, and I felt at home. I knew that that is where I wanted to attend, and I don't know if it was the great coffee or the friendly people that persuaded me of that decision or someone behind the counter.

Romeo: "Does it always have to be a story with you, D? Get to the fucking point…what's the chick's name?"

Dillan: "Selena, her name is Selena. I met her at church three days ago. Oh man, I can't wait for you to meet her."

Romeo: "Damn, Bro, you're whipped!"

Dillan: "I am going to make her my wife, Bro, this is the one."

Romeo: "You've known her for three days, D. Don't be stupid."

Dillan: "When you know, you know."

Romeo: "Yeah, whatever; then what happened?"

Dillan: "I thought you didn't wanna hear my story?"

Romeo: "Whatever, man, I want to know what happens next. How did you end up speaking to her?"

Dillan: "Just as I finished my coffee, I wanted to throw away the cup, but something caught my eye." I pause because I know this will annoy him and I am smiling, waiting for him to shout at me, and on cue he curses.

Romeo: "DAMMIT Dillan! what caught your damn eye?"

Dillan: "She wrote her name and phone number on the side of my cup."

Romeo: "And you didn't see it the whole time you were drinking the coffee?"

Dillan: "No, man, I was watching the people."

Romeo: "I'll see you tomorrow, Loser." I hang up. Damn, that boy loves a story. I can't wait to meet my sister in-law. I shake my head and walk towards the shower.

Dillan's POV:

I get home after an amazing day with Selena, and I am smiling from ear to ear. I go up to my bedroom and I see Miles isn't home yet, it's kinda late, he doesn't really know anyone here and he is never out if he is not with me, so maybe I should call him. I dial his number while taking off my shoes but there's no answer. I'll take a shower and if he is not home after that, I think I'll have to go look for him, I am really worried now. My phone beeps and I see a message pop up on the screen; it's from Miles. "Hey, Bro, I'm with Lilly, don't wait up."

My heart sinks, shit. Romeo is going to kill the son of a bitch, dammit! I might just kill this fucker myself. He knows how Romeo feels about Lilly, what the hell is he thinking? I put my shoes back on, grab my jacket and grab the spare keys, but then I stop dead in my tracks - why is my phone ringing? Oh, maybe smart arse decided to call me back. I am struggling to retrieve my phone from my pocket. damn skinny jeans, shit, I missed the call, when I eventually get my phone, I see it was Romeo. This guy must be psychic. When I check my messages there are two, one from Romeo and one that I sent to… OH SHIT! I accidently

forwarded Miles's message to Romeo. I call Romeo back immediately. Jeez, what a shit show. He answers on the first ring.

Dillan: "Romeo, let me explain."

Romeo: "What the fuck are you doing with Lilly, man?"

Dillan: "What? No, that message was from Miles." Obviously, it doesn't show who it is from, it's just forwarded from me to him, but I didn't want him to know it was Miles. Why did I say that?

Romeo: "OKAY, WHY THE FUCK IS MILES WITH LILLY?"

Dillan: "Don't yell at me, Bro, I was just going to find out. You weren't supposed to see the message."

Romeo: "Dillan, you know you're making the situation worse, right? Why am I not supposed to see the message? What the hell is going on? I swear to God if you and Miles are playing me, I am going to kick some serious arse."

Dillan: "Calm down, Miles is with Lilly, but I am on my way over there, I will call you back."

Romeo: **"**Dillan, call me when you get to Lilly's place, I want to know why he is with her."

Dillan: "Okay, I am on my way."

Romeo: I try to call Miles, but he is ignoring my calls, so I put all my pride aside and call Lilly. She answers on the second ring.

Lilly: "Romeo?"

Romeo: "Why is Miles at your house at this hour?"

Lilly: "Hello, Romeo."

Romeo: I let out a long sigh because Lilly now first wants to be formal, but then I smile when I think of how stubborn she is. "Hi Lilly, how are you?"

Lilly: "I am so tired Romeo, can we ta….."

Romeo: "Lilly, can you hear me?" We lose connection and the phone dies. I can't take this anymore. I shower and when I am all packed, the Uber arrives downstairs. I check in on Faith and she is fast asleep, so I leave my note next to her bed and I leave. I need to get home. I lock after me and leave my key in our secret spot, underneath the pot plant. I walk down the stairs and I

check my phone, and still nothing from Dillan. I feel down and miserable. I eventually look up and one of my friends is standing right in front of me. I am so confused; where's my Uber driver?

Romeo: "Hey man, what's up?"

Derek: "I was told to fetch you from the witch's fortress and here I am."

Romeo: "Whatever that means, I am not interested, Bro, I have to get back home.'

Derek: "Look, one last chill or lunch won't hurt, the guys are all waiting; we just want to have a proper send off. You never know when we will see each other again."

Romeo: "Chill? Lunch? It's like 5am, Derek, what the hell are we supposed to do for six hours?"

Derek: "What sort of question is that? Who are you and what have you done with our boy? We are going to drink, chill, make a hookah and hit some PlayStation. Give the other guys some time to decide."

Romeo: I burst out laughing. Derek always thinks he is a boss man or a leader. He sits while the others work. We hate it because while he sits and does nothing, he does do one thing really well - bark orders. He tells you where to put things, what to move and what doesn't look right. There is definitely always something he finds fault with. "Cool, man, take me to your place." I put my bags in his boot and he drives off. What's one more day?

Derek: "So, why did you and Faith end things?"

Romeo: "I really don't want to talk about Faith."

Derek: "Oh, come on man, what happened?"

Romeo: "She told everyone that we were engaged and that she was having my baby."

Derek: "Woooow! That's hectic. Wait, is she?"

Romeo: "Are you crazy? I always, always wear protection."

Derek: "And so say all of us!"

Romeo: "Shut up and drive." We finally arrive at Derek's place, and it is quiet and just what I needed. We walk inside and the PlayStation is set up and there are ice cold beers in the fridge. I get us some

drinks and start up the game while he makes the hookah. We spend the next few hours getting smashed; I see him make some calls and the other guys start joining and smoking, and we forget about eating or the lunch or whatever was planned. We end up drinking and braaiing at Derek's place and I have never been this hammered. Around midnight, the party is over, but these guys are just getting started. Some ladies join us, and I don't know these women, but they are gorgeous. I am sitting with some of the guys around the fire and something distracts me. The car's lights are bright and shining in my face and I can't really see who it is, but it's pissing me off. I walk towards the owner and when I come closer, the door opens. I see sexy, long legs and heels, and when I look up I don't know if the booze has kicked in, if the legs before me are causing it, or it's this goddess who smiles the minute she sees me, but I am dazed. Wait, I know who this is. "Amy!" I scream her name and she tells me to stop shouting. I don't remember the last few hours, but I wake up, in bed, at Derek's house, with Amy in my arms.

We are naked and I am dead. Lilly is going to kill me.

CHAPTER 16

24 hours ago

Lilly….

I hear my name and it gives me a fright; I squint my eyes so I can see who else is with me.

"Who's there?"

"It's me…. Miles."

Lilly: "Miles…. why are you standing in the dark? You scared me."

Miles: "I didn't mean to scare you, I'm sorry."

Lilly: "How did you get past security at this hour? They never let anyone in after 10pm unless we leave instructions."

Miles: "I told them you called me and needed my help. When he saw you were crying outside, it confirmed my story, he thought you needed me."

Lilly: "How did you know I would be outside and crying?" I dry my tears and sit down on the steps behind me. I feel exposed in this silky night dress. Damn, I thought I would be alone, now I am practically naked in front of Romeo's brother.

Miles: "I didn't know, I took a chance, I wanted to check up on you. I know Aunty Lisa, my mum, has asked you to do something

exceedingly difficult. I was listening to the conversation." What the hell is she wearing?

Lilly: He is checking me out, I need to keep him talking and get him away from the front view. "Yeah, it's kinda crazy, I don't know. Come sit with me. I don't want to get hurt, you know, but I know your mum just misses her son, she doesn't want to lose him. It feels like we've all lost him and it's kinda difficult to accept."

Miles: "You have to think this through before you make a decision, Lilly." I sit down next to her, and I know what she's doing. She wants me to sit down next to her so I can't look at the full view. Damn, she's hot. I see now what Romeo is so protective over. I could tell when she was at the house the other day, the way her jeans hugged her arse, but this, this little sexy item of lingerie is just that, it's little, it's sexy, and I can see everything.

Lilly: "I can't put myself first when I can see the pain in your mum's eyes. I just won't be able to sleep peacefully if I could have done something to make her feel better or to change the situation. I mean I didn't know he would actually agree to come home, but I had to try."

Miles: "What do you mean, he would agree? Have you already made the call?" Shit, am I too late? I can't believe I developed feelings for my brother's ex-girlfriend, but what loyalty do I owe him?

Lilly: "Yes, if I didn't do it then, I knew I would never have the nerve to do it."

Miles: "I wish you hadn't."

Lilly: "You wish I hadn't what? Made the call? I had to decide, Miles. Are we just going to turn our backs on him? No, that is something I don't think I would ever be able to do." Miles is kinda cute, looks like a bit like Romeo - they definitely have the same lips: plump, juicy… *Lilly, stop it! Focus*.

Miles: "Look, Lilly, I just recently met Romeo and Dillan, and they are great, and I love having a family and siblings, it's new and it's amazing. I have always been alone, an only child, no cousins or distant family. My mum made sure I went to the best schools,

and you know what that means, there are like ten kids in one classroom, you never have any friends, not loyal ones anyway. There were so many extra-curricular activities that I hardly had time to do my homework. I was well dressed, well looked after, and well taught, so I know when someone is being taken for a ride. He is only going to break your heart again and I don't want anything from you. I don't have ulterior motives. I don't even know you. I would like to be your friend - from what everyone says about you, you deserve the world: A man who will love you, cherish you, and take care of you. Look, I have only ever seen you twice, and both times you were talking or thinking of Romeo, and both times you were crying. Like I said before, I don't know you, but you are beautiful, and I think you deserve better, better than the man we call my brother."

Lilly: "You're right, you don't know me at all. Romeo is… was… my first love and he will always be special to me, but it doesn't mean because I made the call and asked him to come home that we are automatically going to get back together, okay? I will play along, when he gets here tomorrow. I will say hi, I will speak to him, and I will disappear. Besides, I have a boyfriend. I did this for your mum."

Miles: "Oh, uhm, you're not single?"

Lilly: "No, like I said, I have a boyfriend and I only did this for your mum." I am getting too uncomfortable around Miles, I'm even starting to lie. Who the hell can I claim as my boyfriend now? He is so nosey I'm sure he will follow up on my story. I need to go back inside; I start to get up, but he takes my hand, and he pulls me closer to him. IS THIS GUY GOING TO KISS ME? At this angle, he is actually not that bad looking, he has a soft jawline, his eyes are big and green. He has sleek black hair and the whitest teeth I have ever seen.

Miles: "Lilly, I won't hurt you, I won't do anything you don't want me to do, but I need to feel your lips. Before Romeo comes home tomorrow and alters your view, let me have this moment."

Lilly: "Miles, we can't…" Before I can finish my sentence, he puts one hand around my waist, and it feels like I am about to surrender. He pulls me closer to him and because my night dress is so thin, I can feel his hard abs, his chest, and that the muscles in his arms are strong and hard. He kisses me and because he is so tall, I have to lift onto my toes. He opens my mouth with his tongue, and he taste like caramel. It all happened so fast. I didn't have time to react, I didn't have time to stop him. The kiss lasts forever, and I give in. I lean against his arms, his strong, heavy arms, and I am kissing him with all of me, but there is no spark, nothing. We pull away and I look into his bold green eyes but there is just no flame, this was a mistake. I feel it in my gut, I feel sick. "I would like to go inside, please let go of me."

Miles: "Yes, ma'am, but before you go, will you have dinner with me tomorrow night please? As friends?"

Lilly: "No, Miles. I don't know what you're trying to do, and I suppose I should say thank you for coming over and caring about me, but Romeo is my friend, my ex, and your brother, we should respect that. The kiss was a mistake. It won't happen again. Goodnight." I turn to leave and walk away as fast as I can. I need to get away from him.

Lilly's POV:

I am practically running to the door and when I am safely inside, I briefly turn around and he is standing and watching me with a goofy smile on his face. What have I done? I touch my lips; they feel tender, but it doesn't feel real. I have kissed so many guys since my first kiss with Romeo and the kisses have all felt the same - empty, and senseless. I walk up to my bedroom, and I am in a daze. What have I done? Why am I smiling? I need to stop this and clear my head. No one can ever know what just happened. I need to call Miles; he needs to keep his trap shut. I am so drained; my eyes feel heavy. I decide to call him tomorrow; I can't wait to see Romeo tomorrow, and with that lingering thought, I doze off.

The next morning, I wake up with the sun blazing into my bedroom. I wake up feeling exhausted and weary, but I am excited too. Romeo will be home today. I hope he comes around to say hi or I hope his mum calls me to let me know he is home. Maybe I should call Aunt Lisa, maybe he is home already. I decide on sending Dillan a message instead and he responds immediately.

"*Hey, Lilly, no, he is not home yet. I will text you as soon as he walks through the door."*

I almost skip to the bathroom; I take a shower and get dressed. I love Saturdays. I spend my day looking at my phone and changing my outfit almost fifteen times. I am annoyed that nothing looks great on me. I look fine in everything, but I need to look great. The day passes and the sun is setting as quickly as it rose this morning and I still haven't received a text. What if Dillan just forgot to let me know? I decide to call him but it just rings. With all the excitement of Romeo being home, maybe he didn't hear his phone. I am losing my patience; I need to see for myself what is happening. I grab my jacket, phone, and keys. When I reach the Kale residence, Miles and Dillan are outside and they both come to greet me. I look at Dillan, but he looks sadly down and shakes his head, and that's it. I know he is not home, and again, Miles was right. He broke my heart. I knew he wouldn't come - why did I get my hopes up? I am angry now, then sad. I think about Amy, Faith and so many others, like Nicole, Sally, …I could go on forever. His disappearing acts, he is always in trouble, his drinking, his fighting. When has Romeo ever kept a promise, stood by me, dated only me, or even just apologised for all of it? Never. I have never been important to him or meant anything to him. Everyone saw it but me. I was a fool, an idiot, a laughingstock. No more. It ends today.

I drive home, broken, sad, and shattered. I am limp; daydreaming and just driving to get home. I don't even know if I am on the right road, it's all a blur, when a loud bang wakes me from my fantasy. I see two cars collide and one of them is still spinning and out of control. I am shocked and scared. I grab my phone and call 911.

So many other cars have stopped; people are making phone calls and others are running towards the scene to see if they can assist. I have got out of my car, but

I know better than to go close to a scene where both drivers aren't moving. They don't look too good. It takes hours for the ambulance and police to get here. I have called my mum and she knows I am okay. I decide to get dinner at the mall because now I am starving, so I start to walk back to my car when he catches my eye. I could feel someone staring at me and when I look up, he is standing across the street. I have stopped dead in my tracks, and I must look like an idiot. I shake my head and continue back to my car, but my gut tells me to look back and I see him chasing after me. I hear him call after me, so I stop. This could be interesting.

Stranger: "Excuse me, miss…. Hello, Ma'am, excuse me."

Lilly: I burst out laughing, what foolishness is this? Did this guy seriously just call me ma'am? I stop and turn to face him. My word, he is like a dream. He is wearing a long-sleeved black jersey with black jeans. He has this hint of vanilla, mochaccino, fresh cream, caramel-looking skin, and he is… he is just gorgeous. He is tall and has a manly stubble, but not too much; his eyes are deep and dark; and he almost looks dangerous until he smiles. His smile melts the skin off my body, his teeth are dazzling. I realise I haven't said anything yet and I must look like a dumb blonde.

Stranger: "Hi, I'm sorry."

Lilly: "Sorry for?"

Stranger: "I don't really know, chasing after you I guess."

Lilly: There he goes again, smiling. He needs to stop smiling. I can't really concentrate with all this yumminess standing in front of me. "That's okay, can I help you with anything?"

Stranger: "My name is Josh. I was wondering if I could have a minute of your time, please?"

Lilly: "Hi Josh, I'm Lilly." I swear if this guy is about to sell me insurance or something, I will scream. I am tired of having bad luck with men.

Josh: "Are you married?"

Lilly: I start giggling again like a schoolgirl, "No, Josh, I'm not married."

Josh: "Oh, thank God!"

CHAPTER 17

Josh's POV:

There is a massive accident at the main intersection of this new town we moved to. It's just me and my grandmother; my parents passed and my Abuela raised me. I bought a house here because it's much closer to the hospital she needs. She has been traveling back and forth for the last year and I couldn't bear to watch any longer. She has cancer and it's hard enough as it is dealing with the C monster.

I stand outside, in front of my car on the corner, and keep my distance. So many other cars have stopped, people have called the police already and others have started helping, or at least trying to. Not much for me to do. I am really hungry, but I don't really know this place. My grandmother has been admitted to hospital because she had a setback, and I am lost without her cooking. I look around and watch how panicked everyone is - scared and animated about the events of the accident - when I see a small, firm, stubborn, and oh-so-sexy young lady standing on the other side of the road. My eyes are glued to her, she has long black hair, she is wearing a short pink dress and she is just standing there with her arms folded across her chest. She is gifted, damn! I can't really see but she looks like she has amazing legs and boobs. She starts walking away and I almost scream, I haven't had enough yet. Then she suddenly stops and looks directly at me; I am really nervous, and I start to wonder if I did actually scream.

She sees me looking at her, shakes her head and continues walking towards what looks like her car. I can't let her get away; I would never make peace with letting her slip away. I start running after her like an idiot, but I don't care, I need to at least get her name. She turns to look at me but doesn't stop walking so now I really start screaming and calling after her.

Josh: "Excuse me, Miss…. Hello, Ma'am, excuse me."
As soon as I approach her, she bursts out laughing, but doesn't say anything - she is just staring at me. It gives me a minute to really look at her. We just stand there looking at each other and it's confirmed. She really is gorgeous. Long black hair, it looks like silk. Small, sexy lips, they are just the right colour. She has tiny, flat eyes and the roundest, smallest nose. I have never seen anything like this, she is so beautiful, it looks like she came out of a fairy-tale.

Josh: "Hi, I'm sorry." I decide to say something because we are just standing there.

Stranger: "Sorry for?"

Josh: "I don't really know, chasing after you, I guess." I smile because I don't really know what else to say. Her voice is like candyfloss. My favourite!

Stranger: "That's okay, can I help you with anything?"

Josh: "My name is Josh. I was wondering if I could have a minute of your time, please?"

Stranger: "Hi Josh, I'm Lilly."

Josh: "Are you married?" I laugh at myself for what just came out of my mouth. Did I really just ask that out loud? I mean, I really want to know, but did I just ask a complete stranger if she was married? She starts laughing at me and I melt, this is perfection. She tells me she's not married. I think I silently thank God but she's blushing so I must have said it out loud again. I have certainly lost my wits and charms around this woman. "Lilly, would you like to have dinner with me?"

Lilly: "When, now?"

Josh: "Yes, right now."

Lilly: "Sure, why not, I'm starving."

Josh: "Great, me too. Can you follow me, or should we drop your car off somewhere?"

Lilly: "No, I don't really know you, so I might need to escape sometime during the evening. Follow me, I know where we can go."

Josh: I run to my car, and we follow each other to a small, local shopping centre, and the place is crowded. We park our cars and I go to her, and we walk in silence together to a cosy restaurant. It's beautiful. It has white walls, white floors. and outside there are white umbrellas. The tables are beautiful, brown oak, and so are their menus. Lilly looks like she has money and good taste, and I don't. I hope I can afford this place. Once we are seated, she asks me about myself, and we talk for hours while enjoying the meal, and I give her my story:

"I lost my parents when I was three years old. I have a beautiful grandmother, no siblings, and no other family. My grandmother's name is Ola - yes, like the ice cream." She laughs but she is listening to me intently. "Ola put me through school, paid for piano lessons, took me to church and put me through university. I don't come from much, Lilly, I worked hard for everything I have. I have a few rands to my name, but I have a home, a grandmother, an education, and my health. I am an architect by trade and a shower vocalist by night." She laughs on cue. "I love the sound of your giggle and I love mango ice cream, juice, the fruit, and salad. Anything mango and I'm putty. I love food, good music, and good company, and that's me."

She looks at me but there is no pity in her eyes, just pure sincerity. She tells me her story and I was right; she comes from money. She tells me about a guy named Romeo who took the life from her soul, and I hate him already. I intend on fixing her heart and making her believe in love again, and then again, on cue, she says she hasn't lost her faith in love, she knows there is someone out there for her. When a waiter approaches us, we actually both look up for the first time since we sat down. "Excuse me, Lilly, we are closing in ten minutes. May I bring the bill?" I pay the bill and she offers to help me, but Ola would skin me alive if she found out I let a lady pay the bill on a date. I walk her to her car, and I am so

tempted to invite her back to my place, especially now that Ola is in hospital, but I don't want to ruin this. So, I open her door and she thanks me for a wonderful evening. Her smile reaches her eyes and I know that she is being genuine, and I am glad because I had a great evening too. I lean in for a hug and we bid good night. I drive home like a high school idiot with a stupid grin on my face. When I get home, I open the door, switch on the lights, and call Lilly to make sure she got home safely. We end up talking on the phone for hours and I can't believe my luck. New town, new life, new love!

Lilly's POV:

Josh seems nice, he asked me out for dinner, and I was hungry and going to eat alone anyway so we might as well eat together. I decide to go in my own car, just to be safe.

Josh runs to his car and follows me to a small, local shopping centre where I always eat, and the place is crowded. We park our cars, and we walk together to a cosy restaurant. He is noticeably quiet. The restaurant is beautiful. It has white walls and white décor. The tables are beautiful, brown oak. I come here once a week. I love their food and their service. After we place our order, we make small talk, and when the food arrives, we both dig in and I ask him to tell me a little about himself.

He was incredibly young when his parents died, and he is very fond of his grandmother. I like that he can play the piano. He is an engineer, or as he puts it, an architect, so he has a good head on his shoulders. Then he asks me about me and my shoulders shrug because I don't even like my story. I tell him my parents are rich and I am not, but he doesn't believe me. I tell him a little about Romeo and how he broke my heart, hoping if Josh heard how he took the life from my soul he wouldn't break my heart and I might find some happiness. Although I don't want him to think I am desperate. So, I tell him I haven't lost faith in love; I know I will find the right guy. Tommy, the waiter, approaches, "Excuse me, Lilly, we are closing in ten minutes. May I bring the bill?" I offer to pay the bill, but I know his type, he is proud, so I let him pay and we leave. He opens my door and

I genuinely smile because he is so sweet, and I had a great evening. We hug and I drive home with a big smile and feeling a whole lot better than I did a few hours ago. As soon as I get home, my phone rings and it's a number I don't know, so I answer and it's Josh. I am smitten. We talk for hours, and I can't wait to tell Lee and Tessa about Josh.

I wake up the next day feeling like a brand-new person. I am preparing for college, and I can't get this silly grin off my face. My day soars by, and when my classes are done, I sit on a table outside in the sun. The roster changed, so I am waiting for everyone. A few minutes later the guys join me and while we are leaving to go home, I tell them all about Romeo not showing. They all act sad for me, but I know they actually want to say *We told you so*. My male friends are always telling me they know how guys think and I need to listen to them, but I always think they just want me to do what they say.

I can't wait for the evening because Josh promised me, he would visit me after he has been to Granny Ola. I get some assignments done while I wait, and on cue, John calls me from downstairs and says I have a visitor. I am far from ready for him to meet everyone, so I run downstairs and ask him if we can visit outside in the back house. That is my private space since William has left home. We sit and talk, and I love how easily conversation flows with him. He is so sweet and very funny. Josh makes me laugh - I laugh until my tummy aches and tears are rolling down my face. He shows me his toes for an unknown reason and then tells me he is obsessed with pretty feet. He begs to see mine, but I refuse. I didn't start this game, why should I be obligated to show him my feet? I don't want to disappoint him so early in this friendship/relationship, so I stand my ground and say no. He starts to pull at my leg, and he really wants to see my feet - this guy is crazy! I jerk my leg away from him and he starts chasing me. I am laughing loudly because he really can't catch me. We end up falling on the sofa, just laughing and smiling. I am happy. For the first time in a long time, I am happy.

Josh's POV:

Lilly is so sweet, and she has a lot of energy. We laugh and I chase her around because I pretend, I need to see her feet, but in all honesty, I really don't care what

they look like. I love how she laughs until she cries, it makes me laugh. We are like two teenagers from a movie, I am so happy that it feels unreal. Their house is huge; she tells me John is their security for the property, and people who need security clearly have a lot of money.

Josh: "It's getting late, I should probably go."

Lilly: "I don't want you to go, we are having so much fun!" I make my voice like a baby's; I really don't want him to go.

Josh: "I know, Baby, but you have classes tomorrow and I have work." She is so cute.

Lilly: "Okay, let me walk you out.":

Josh: "Before we go, there is something I need to tell you."

Lilly: Oh no! I knew this was too good to be true. Here comes the catch. "I'm listening."

Josh: "Don't look so nervous, I just want you to know that I really like you, Lilly. I hope you feel the same way. I know we just met but you make me happy. Will you, uhmmm, will you be… gosh now I am nervous. Will you be my girlfriend?"

Lilly: I am blushing so badly; I can feel my cheeks burning. I just stare at him. Did I even hear him properly? It's because when he speaks, I am always having my own fantasies, I never pay attention. I knew this would get me into trouble one day. I'm just going to say yes, I hope he actually asked me. "Yes, Josh."

Josh: "That took long, you had me going there for a second." I can't believe she said yes, took a while but we got there eventually. She walks me to my car, and we share our first, real passionate kiss. Damn, I am one lucky bastard.

CHAPTER 18

Tessa and Zane

Zane's POV:

Tessa has always been stubborn and rough around the edges, but she has also been true to herself, pure and kind. She is so different from anyone I have ever met. She isn't materialistic and she doesn't care what I have or don't have as long as we are comfortable. I have spoken to her parents and mine and I have everything I need. It's time to make this marvellous woman my wife. She is oblivious to what I have in mind for her; she doesn't really pay attention to trivial things, but I know if I make a big gesture, she will freak out, so I want it to be special but not overbearing.

Tessa and I have been together for a little over two years now. We're both young. I am twenty-six and she's twenty-four, and I understand that in the eyes of some members of her family or the church, and even society, that this may seem like we're rushing because why couldn't we just wait, if we're planning on being together forever anyway? We met at a concert, parted ways at the end, and somehow found each other on Facebook with nothing but each other's first names, and the rest, like they say, is history. We stayed far apart; I mean it wasn't a walking distance. We did the long-distance thing for over ten months before I finally made up my mind, left my parents' house and moved into a flat close by. I asked

her to move in with me and we have lived together for almost a year now, and we are the proud mom and dad of an insanely cute little boy.

When we first got together, we talked about getting married all the time. We were obviously in the honeymoon phase and a bit naive then, but we sincerely meant it. Since we've grown out of that honeymoon phase, a lot of that talk has stopped. I believe this is largely due to the fact that I am a worrier by nature, and I worry about the fact that I can't plan out every little part of our future with certainty.

We hit a rough patch a few months into our relationship, and I lost my job, and while we were figuring out how things would work out, marriage didn't seem important, so we stopped talking and everything just kinda fell dead. Since then, I have started a new job, I make enough money to support us, and Tessa is working. Our son Troy is in day care and we are happy, so I figure, *why not*?

It is clear that I love her unconditionally and I want her in my life for the long haul, everyone says so, but I am scared she isn't ready. My cousin jokingly brought it up at Christmas time and I believe she essentially said, "Maybe sometime in the next couple of years, I don't think we're in any rush!" And I'm not in any particular rush as we are young but given that I know in my heart of hearts that I want to be with her forever, I've decided to just take my shot. I hint now and then or jokingly say I have to propose the next time 'that band' plays a concert in the city where we met, and after two years, a tour date has finally been scheduled. In my dream of all dreams, this is where I want to do it. I have it all planned out in my head.

All I want is the promise of a future together. I just want her. I fear that she'll say no for some reason or another but tonight is the night.

We get ready for the concert, and on our way there, we drop Troy off at her mum's place. This is exciting. We haven't had 'alone time' in forever, and this is a much-needed date night. This also played in my favour, so when I asked her to dress up and do her hair and nails, this was my excuse. We haven't done this in a while. After a thousand kisses and tears from Tessa, this is the first time we are leaving Troy over for the night. We head out. We are on our way, driving and

listening to music from the car radio and just holding hands. I am nervous but so excited and I actually feel confident. We get to the concert, and everything is arranged. I order drinks for us and we listen to our favourite band play. Before the last song starts, I know this is my cue. I step back, like two feet behind her so she doesn't really notice, and I wait. On cue, the electronic signboard reads *Tessa, will you marry me?* She is reading the sign way too long, but it gives me a chance to kneel down, on one knee like my mum said to do, and wait. I see her hands clutch her mouth and everyone around us has moved and given us space. She turns to face me and finds me on my knee, and the music is cut off and there is silence.

"Tessa, I am in this for the long ride, I am here to make you laugh and smile.

We will live like best friends and make love like soulmates.

We may fight like enemies, but I am committed to you, now and forever.

Will you marry me?"

She nods her head yes and everyone screams and cheers. She is crying but I don't care. She said yes and that's all I needed.

Tessa's POV:

Zane is an introvert. He is smart and sweet, and I couldn't have asked for a more understanding and respectable man. He doesn't like to dance, but when I ask him, he tries his best not to look bored. I appreciate the effort he makes to keep me happy. I used to feel like I didn't fit well into his family, but what new couple doesn't have doubts like this? I always thought I was so different to them, but 'we' work and fit well together now, and his family love Troy and me, and everything is perfect. He has been acting so strangely lately and I hope nothing is wrong. We have been together for a little over two years now. We're both young. I am twenty-four and he's twenty-six. We met at a concert; it was the best night of my life. We dated long-distance thing for a while, and I thought it would never

work because I am clingy, and I always missed him, but we made it work. When he moved away from his family to be closer to me, that's when I knew this man was mine.

When we first started dating, all we could talk about was getting married. We were excited and talked about our futures a lot, but then as time went on, I realised he worried about everything. I was scared that he only wanted to marry me because he was worried that it was the right thing to do, not because he really wanted to, and that made me sad. He then lost his job and that made things so much worse, and then I started to worry - worry that he was under pressure to provide for us, and I wanted to relieve some of that pressure, so I stopped the talk about marriage. I love him with all my heart and all I want is to be with him, but when the time is right, it will just happen. He started a new job and now we are okay, we live well. I have a decent job and our son Troy is just perfect. He goes to day care, and we are in a good place financially. I know he loves me. Like I said, he respects me and treats me well. At Christmas, his cousin joked about marriage and asked when he was going to 'pop the question'. I panicked and said, "Maybe sometime in the next couple of years, I don't think we're in any rush!" I don't want to pressure him.

The band that played at the concert the night we met is in town and Zane said he got tickets for us, it's so romantic. We haven't had a date night in years, and I am a little sad that we have to leave Troy, but at some point, this was bound to happen, right? We get ready for the concert, and on our way there, we drop Troy off at my mum's place. Zane has never before asked me to dress up and do my nails and my hair, but I am not about to complain, I need the pampering - what woman doesn't? After a thousand kisses and crying because of leaving Troy, I get my head back in the game. Yah! Date night! We are driving and listening to music from the car radio and just holding hands; my man is so sweet. We arrive at the concert, and we get some drinks, and the night is clear, and the stars are beautiful. The last song starts, and I am hungry, I am waiting for the band to start singing when the signboard lights up and it catches my eye so I look up and I see *Tessa, will you marry me?* Wait, is that my name? My ears are blocked, and everything is so quiet. I start to panic, and I look around because I don't feel Zane next to me anymore. When I turn around, he is on his knee, and I am crying.

"Tessa, I am in this for the long ride, I am here to make you laugh and smile.

We will live like best friends and make love like soul mates.

We may fight like enemies, but I am committed to you, now and forever.

Will you marry me?"

Everyone is screaming and cheering and all I can do is nod, YES!

I am engaged; oh, my word, I am engaged to the man of my dreams!

CHAPTER 19

Amy's POV:

I get a strange call from a number I don't know but the guy tells me he knows where Romeo is and that he is also aware that Romeo hasn't stopped talking about me and would love to see me. Every time I hear Romeo's name, my heart pounds like it's going to jump out of my chest and I get a weird sensation in my stomach. I love that man and I can't do without him even though I know I will never measure up to Lilly. Yes, I know, Lilly is his true love, I know how he feels about her, and I know he will always go running when she calls. He dreams about her, keeps pictures of her, talks about her, smiles when others mention her name, I know all of this, but why, why can't I just let him go? I deserve better.

I get dressed, knowing all of these things, knowing he will never choose me. I drive as fast as I can because I want to see him, I want to kiss him, I want him, and nothing will stop me. It is around midnight, the guy said they were partying, so I know he is drunk. When I pull up at Derek's house, the house where we met, I see so many people and other women, and I hope he is alone. I look around and I see him sitting with some of the guys around the fire. He looks directly at my car, and he looks angry. Shit, I hate it when he is upset. Maybe he doesn't want to see me. I open my door and he looks directly at me, and I smile. "Amy!" he shouts, and I am a little taken aback, but I know he is wasted. I grab his t-shirt, pull him closer and kiss him like my life depends on it. We end up drinking and dancing and this is my chance. I lead him to the bedroom, and I take off all my clothes.

Romeo: "Amy, please stop taking your clothes off, I love Lilly and I am going to be with Lilly."

Amy: "Romeo, I came here tonight to fuck you, that's it." He grabs my hair and grasps each side of my head. His kiss is demanding and almost painful. I moan in his mouth, and he pushes me onto the bed behind me. Romeo and I have never made love, it is always raw, harsh, and emotionless. I feel his erection and I want him so badly. I am gripping his upper arms, I feel his biceps, he's muscular and strong. He undoes his button and before I can say anything, he puts on a condom, and he enters me. The next morning, I wake before him. I know this is the only way, so I slide out of bed, get rid of the condom, fix my hair, and get back into bed.

When he eventually wakes up, the sun is shining and we are lying in bed, alone and together. This is a dream come true for me. I love waking up next to him, it makes me feel like we are married. He looks at me, very surprised, and then he asks me if we had sex. My spirit is immediately dampened. I am hurt and offended but I keep my pose and say yes. "Romeo, we didn't use a condom." He jumps out of bed and starts frantically looking for it. I lie there, worried, and paralysed. I am astonished by how well I know this man. It is a good thing I hid the dirty condom in Derek's chest of drawers. He will never look in another man's underwear drawer.

Romeo: "Amy, you have always been on the pill, so we're okay, right?"

Amy: "No, Romeo. After you left me, I vowed to never be with anyone again, until marriage of course, and decided I didn't need the pill anymore."

Romeo: "Well, so much for keeping your vows. We need to get you the morning-after pills, get up and get ready. I am going to take a shower."

Amy: He leaves me like he always does, feeling hurt, insulted and unwanted. This shit has to end. He can't keep doing this to me. It's over; I say this out loud, IT IS OVER. Today, today I am

angry. I get up, grab my clothes, and get dressed. He will never, ever see me again. This is a vow I can keep.

3 MONTHS LATER

LILLY'S POV:

Josh and I have been dating for three months now, and today I am going to meet Granny Ola. She has finally been discharged and she is doing a lot better. We planned a lunch, and I am so nervous. We drive a few miles, and I am familiar with their home, but when we reach the gates, it feels like the first time that I am coming here. We walk hand in hand, and he assures me all will be fine. I have brought flowers and some wine because Josh said if I cooked anything, Granny Ola would be offended.

I see Granny Ola; she is skinny and frail, but she is beautiful. She smiles as soon as she sees Josh. They are obviously remarkably close and that makes me more nervous. She turns to face me, takes my hands, and says, "Let's see what we have here." Now I am really nervous. She studies me for a few seconds, which feels like hours, and she lets out a genuine smile. In my head I am thinking that I hope that smile means she approves.

Granny Ola: "Josh, you did good, my son, she is a keeper, you can see it in her eyes."

I am beaming, I am smiling so hard, my cheekbones are hurting.

Josh: "Thanks, Abuela."

He kisses both her cheeks and I hand her the flowers and the wine; she thanks me, and we sit down to eat. Granny Ola is a great cook, and like me, she loves wine too. The conversation is easy and flowing. I see where Josh gets his sense of humour from, Granny Ola is funny. She is very animated and when she tells

us stories, she makes all the sound effects. You feel like you are a part of the tale. She starts to tell me about her late husband, and I just know I am going to cry.

Granny Ola: "Today I was looking at old photos of my husband. I saw him in a black leather cloak and my hands started to tremble and tears came to my eyes. I remembered the love story we shared. At the age of twenty, I decided to read my fortune with a mirror and some of my friends. When my turn came, I saw a man in a black cloak. I got very frightened and stopped trying to read my fortune. A couple of months later while walking down the street I saw a tall man in a black cloak and got frightened again, but the man came up to me to introduce himself - it was your grandfather. Soon the war started, and he was taken to the frontline - while saying goodbye to me, he told me: "If I stay alive, I'll find you and marry you." He found me. She looks fondly down at her fingers while playing with her wedding ring.

Josh: "Abuela always tells me this story. She says that after he found her, they got married and had six children. They had my mum, two other daughters and three sons. It was perfect, wasn't it, Abuela?"

Granny Ola: "It was better than perfect, Josh. When your mother was born, I didn't know she would be so much trouble, but she was. She came home late, never did her homework, and dressed like a boy. Oh, that made your grandfather so angry. She was at least ten when he passed. The others don't even remember him.

Josh: "Grandma, remember the prostitute story?" We both laugh, and I start to tell Lilly about it. About fifteen years ago, one day my granny was talking to her neighbour, who told her that a young girl they both knew had moved to the city to work as a prostitute. My granny blatantly said that all professions are needed and important in their own way, and that this work has to be done by someone too. The neighbour was shocked by the reaction of my granny but agreed because she respected her greatly. Later that day, I asked Granny Ola how she could

approve of prostitutes, and she only then realised her friend had said *prostitute* while she'd heard *substitute.* She thought that the girl was going to be a surrogate mother, which still didn't make sense.

Lilly: We all laugh, and I spend my afternoon listening to stories and enjoying the company of my boyfriend and his grandmother. About two hours later, Granny Ola goes to take her nap. She believes in routines, and I love it. Josh and I do the dishes and then we go sit in the back yard to catch some sun and relax. We kiss so much, and I love his lips, but I don't want to ruin it with sex. I know that we will get there sooner rather than later.

Josh: "What's wrong, Munchkin?"

Lilly: "Josh, I think we should slow down."

Josh: "Why, did something happen? Did I do something wrong?"

Lilly: "No, it's nothing you've done. I just don't want to ruin things between us. Josh, there's something you should know, I'm a virgin and I …" before I finish my sentence, he interrupts me.

Josh: "Lilly, I can wait forever."

Lilly: My phone rings and it's my mum. She sounds scared and out of breath. She is crying and trying to explain something to me but all I got was, "Lilly, you need to come home please. I need to know you are safe."

We rush over and thank the heavens that Josh doesn't stay too far from me. When we get there, I see the Kales are all there, including Romeo, Miles, and Dillan. There is blood on the floor and my mum and Aunty Lisa are crying hysterically. I didn't even know Romeo was back.

I run inside and my mum grabs me as soon as she sees me. "Mum, what's the matter, are you okay? What happened?" She explains and says Uncle Eddie and Aunt Lisa received a letter saying that Jessica Smith's blood was on their hands and if they didn't pay or go to prison, they would kill all the children in their families. They didn't take it seriously as Jessica has now been gone for ten years and Uncle Edward was cleared of all the charges. This morning, they found blood all over their floors, stairs, and kitchen counters. Aunty Lisa made everyone come

over to my mum's place to keep them safe, so they are moving in with us until this mess is sorted. I almost faint.

I try to act normally and hold onto my mum for a few minutes to calm her, and then everyone is ushered to rooms and showers to get cleaned up. Josh and I are in my bedroom, talking about this whole mess. He is extremely uncomfortable with Romeo staying here with me and I am trying to reassure him that he can trust me. We are going in circles because he is trying to convince me that it's not me he's worried about. My mum lets everyone know that dinner is ready and insists that Josh stays. This is going to be awkward.

We go down to the dining room, and our massive table that seats twenty, that we hardly ever use, is laden with food, and my mum, Millicent and Aunty Lisa are in full swing. Josh whispers in my ear that it looks like Christmas, and I can't help but giggle. He has never seen such a big table. It's always just been Granny Ola and him. I see Romeo and Josh giving each other dirty looks and I don't know which way to run or hide. Why is he here?

We sit down. At the head of the table is my dad, famous Uncle Wes, and on his right is my mum, Aunty Kate. Next to my mum is my handsome older brother William and then his date, my old friend Lee. They make such a cute couple. Next to Lee is my baby sister Marsha and she is as quiet as a mouse. I then sit next to her, and Josh closes off our side of the table. At the tail of the table, which could look like the head depending on how you are looking at it, is the rich and accused Uncle Edward, Romeo's father; his wife is on his right now, starting the row on that end. Next is Romeo's brother and my friend Dillan, and his beautiful but very tiny girlfriend Selena. He looks so happy. I am stoked for him. Next to Selena is Miles, he is giving Josh dirty looks and I hope he has kept his trap shut about our kiss. I stare him off and he looks to his side, where Master Romeo closes off their side of the table.

This is one big mess. When Ty starts crying, I almost jump up and say I'll get him, giving myself some breathing room. Oh, what a mess. How am I going to make this work? I reach the baby room and I see that Ty has picked up his own bottle and fallen off to sleep again. Oh, why, Ty? I needed you to be a baby who

wants love and attention. As I turn back to join our honourable guests, I bump into Miles, which gives me such a big scare. He grabs my mouth, puts his hand around my waist and almost shoves me back into the baby's room. "WHAT THE FU……...?"

CHAPTER 20

MILES'S POV:

My mum has decided that we are all going to have a family breakfast at some restaurant, and we are so many that we actually have to take two cars. I, Romeo, and Dillan are in one car and Mum and Edward are in the SUV. Since Romeo has been home, we haven't talked much. He still thinks I want Lilly and I made a move on her behind his back, and I did. I have never denied it, but for Lilly's sake, I didn't tell him the truth either. My problem is, does she owe him that loyalty after the many times he has left her and broken her heart? Ultimately, it isn't my decision. I do like her; she is beautiful, and I can't stop thinking about her. She is an amazing person, and if she were my girl, I would never mess her around. I just wish we had spent more time together before Romeo's return.

Breakfast is great and everyone is enjoying their meals. After a while, Aunty Lisa tells us that she is sick and now no one is talking. I finally told my adoptive parents that I came out to find Lisa, my real mum. They are so angry with me; I could tell by my dad's voice, but they told me to take my time and come home when I am ready. I don't think I can ever leave Lisa and just go back, not after the news. I need to talk to her though, I need to know what she wants. We finish our food and head home; upon arrival, Peter, the security guard, isn't at the gate. Mr Edward has to get us safely inside, and we immediately call the back-up security company and they alert the police. Romeo, Dillan and I run to help Mr Edward secure the property, when we are scared to death by Mum's screaming. When we reach the front door, there is blood everywhere, and Dillan slips and falls right

into a massive puddle. Someone was inside the house and used animal blood to stain the furniture, walls, and floors. I enter the kitchen to get a rag, and a bucket of blood falls on me and it's like a domino effect. It's as if I triggered a pattern. There are buckets tipping off all over and we are all covered in blood. This was well set up, and it stinks.

The police arrive and they question us for hours. We are traumatised, and we smell. Mr Edward calls his lawyer Jake, who insists they let us go somewhere safe to rest and get cleaned up, and we can give our statements tomorrow. The police are still looking for Peter. We leave and my mum calls Lilly's mum. Mr Edward wants to go to a hotel, but she insists that they have enough room and now Kate and Mum are trying to convince my dad to come to them instead of a stuffy hotel. Mr Wes, Lilly's dad, comes over the car speaker and says to Mr Edward that he has some meat to throw on a fire and needs help eating them. Mr Edward is sold, and we are on our way to Lilly's house. I look over at Romeo and we are all still covered in blood. He looks nervous as hell as he hasn't seen Lilly in years, and I want to laugh. We get there and five minutes later Lilly runs into the house with some guy and just stares at us. We all look like vampires, so I don't blame her. My mum explains that she found a letter saying that Jessica Smith's blood was on their hands and if they didn't pay or go to prison, they would kill all the children in their families. It is the first I am hearing about the letter, but apparently the cops have the letter now. Aunty Kate tells Lilly that we are moving in for a while to keep us safe and until this mess is sorted. She looks like she wants to faint.

Aunty Kate sends us all upstairs to our rooms and showers to finally get cleaned up. I keep looking at the guy who's accompanied Lilly and already I don't like him. Romeo is practically killing the poor guy with his eyes, and it is very uncomfortable. Romeo, Dillan, and I are staying in William's old bedroom. Aunty Kate calls us down after an hour and lets everyone know that dinner is ready, and I see Lilly's must-be-boyfriend coming out of her bedroom with her. This is going to be awkward.

We go down to the dining room and an exceptionally long and narrow table is waiting, prepped with food. Enough food to feed an army. Romeo is still giving

the man who I now know as Josh the death stare. We all sit down at the right side of Mr Edward, and Lilly's family is sitting across from us. They are really well mannered, and they waited for all of us, who are their guests, to sit down first before they are seated. I just sit there looking at Josh because I can see what Lilly sees in him, but I don't see what she wants with him, if that makes sense. I realise I am jealous. Dealing with Romeo as competition was enough. When I look around, I see that Lilly has caught me giving her boyfriend the eyeballs.

A baby starts crying out of nowhere and Lilly jumps up, excusing herself to go and check on the baby. No one else noticed because everyone is talking and it's loud. This is my chance. I excuse myself, mentioning the bathroom, and follow Lilly. I reach the baby room and I see the baby is sleeping and she is about to come back out. She bumps into me and I see she is about to scream so I grab her mouth, I use my free hand to usher her back into the room and close the door behind me.

I push myself up against her and kiss her neck. The room is dark, and I just need one kiss. She hasn't stopped me yet, so I make my way up to her mouth. The atmosphere between us is so tense, it is way more electric then our first kiss.

Lilly's POV:

We are standing behind the door, with my parents, family, ex-boyfriend and actual boyfriend downstairs. The atmosphere is exhilarating, and I know this is wrong, but I cannot stop this kiss, I do not want to. My heart is racing, and my breathing is heavy. He is only kissing my neck. I want more. He turns his face up towards me, looking for permission, and he has romantic dark eyes. He lunges at me and pins me to the wall. We kiss for what feels like minutes and I moan into his mouth. His erection is hard and piercing my hip. I open my mouth and he takes full advantage of this moment. He brings his hand up my top and massages my nipples. I am helpless, I am pinned up against a wall by this beast. This tall, sexy beast. And even though I am loving every second of this moment, I know this will be the last time this will ever happen. I need to say goodbye to Miles and close off this chapter. It is wrong on so many levels: to Romeo, to Josh

and to Miles. A sound from the passage jolts us away from each other and we are breathing like we've run a marathon. We wait, but nothing. We smile and it's like we are having an unspoken conversation. Eventually, he checks the passage. "Come, we're set to go."

Lilly: **"**You know we can't keep doing this?"

Miles: "Yes, Lilly, I know. I like you, I do, but I will never measure up to what you feel for Romeo. I know you love him, despite how he has hurt you and how many times he has left you. I have said this mantra over and over in my head and I will never understand why you love Romeo the way you do, when I am here – me, Miles. I am standing right in front of you begging you to see me, begging you to love me, begging you to choose me, begging to be with you. I needed this to happen tonight. I needed confirmation that we were not meant to be. I have made my peace and you have made your choice."

Lilly: "Then this is goodbye?"

Miles: "Not goodbye, Lilly, I have a feeling we will be seeing a whole lot more of each other."

Lilly: "What do you mean?"

Miles: "You'll see. It's time to go back downstairs. I'll go first because I said I was just going to the bathroom. Give me a few seconds and you can follow."

Lilly: There is nothing left for us to say. I am so confused and filled with mixed emotions. When he lets me go, I feel the coldness of the room. It's dark and I am just standing there. I decide to pull myself together, fix my hair and apply some lip-gloss. I make sure Ty is covered nicely with a blanket before I go downstairs. I turn on the side lamp so that he is not in the dark all by himself and when I look up, I stare directly into the baby monitor.

CHAPTER 21

Kate is an amazing sister; she is younger than me and she has her life together. Kate was always the sweet one. She went to church with our parents, finished school, and helped my mum in the kitchen. She then fell pregnant with William, got married to Wesley, and they both excelled in their careers. Kate is a lecturer at the best university. Wesley is a lawyer. They have a beautiful home, it's huge. Eight bedrooms and a swimming pool. She now has three beautiful children: Will, Lilly and Marsha. I am proud of her.

Me? I am a free spirit. Yes, I am amazing too. I also have my life together, it may not be what others want it to be, but to me it is perfect. I didn't finish school, my parents wanted to kill me, but I was content. I lived life every day to the fullest. Kate has short hair and I have beautiful long black hair, we are very different. I am different to everyone. That's the whole point, don't you think? Imagine if we were all alike, how uninteresting life would be? I was sixteen years old when I met a boy, yes, a boy, not a man. We were kids. He was different too. We were young and in love and we had a son together but faith, life, destiny, whatever you wish to call it, didn't see us stay together in the long run. We went our separate ways and Kate and our mum helped me raise my son.

Then I met my now husband. Ah, he is amazing. We have built our lives together. He is a hydrologist. No one really understand what he does but he is a scientist who researches the distribution, circulation, and physical properties of the earth›s underground and surface waters. He makes a lot of money, and he also gets to help environmental and other scientists conserve and clean up the

environment, as well as search for groundwater. He is extremely busy and almost never home, but he has given me a good life, a wonderful home, and amazing children. My first son he has taken in as his own, and we now have two sons and two daughters. My life is full, we have been good to each other, faithful and happy.

My family and I are close, and Kate and I are the only children. Our parents are still healthy and alive. We are blessed, so what I am about to tell them will destroy us, all of us. I recently felt ill, short of breath, and my body aches. Doctors decided it was stress. I am stressed, life is hard, who wouldn't be? I also lost a lot of weight, which made me feel good and healthy, but I was also always tired. I couldn't eat, I had nausea and persistent indigestion. I went to the toilet more often and the pain, the pain was just too much to bear. My husband then suggested I see a specialist and that's when I found out the unwelcome news. I am dying.

Pulmonary fibrosis is a lung disease that occurs when lung tissue becomes damaged and scarred. This thickened, stiff tissue makes it more difficult for your lungs to work properly. As pulmonary fibrosis worsens, you become progressively shorter of breath. This is what I hear the doctor say, but I'm not really paying attention. He continues, saying, "The scarring associated with pulmonary fibrosis can be caused by a multitude of factors. But in most cases, we can't always pinpoint what's causing the problem. When a cause can't be found, the condition is termed idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis.

"The lung damage caused by pulmonary fibrosis can't be repaired, but medications and therapies can sometimes help ease symptoms and improve quality of life. For some people, a lung transplant might be appropriate, but in your case, this is a late diagnosis. You just waited too long to get professional help."

I spend the morning in a waiting room with women all at least twenty years older than me. I am sent for test after test, slowly realising that it isn't going to be a great day. I sit there and wait for my wonderful husband to drop everything and head straight to meet me so that I don't have to go through this, or hear the results, on my own.

I am scared.

I look at my clothes. I will never be able to face wearing the outfit I have on this morning again. I laugh at my wayward thoughts, thinking about my outfit at this very moment, this heart-breaking moment. After the many tests, I go back to the doctor's room, and he starts talking about radiation treatments and I am hugely relieved when my husband arrives. He isn't scared, worried or shocked, he is a very calm man, and when he sits down and takes my hand, his calmness rubs off on me. He calls my children, my sister, and my parents. They are my everything. The doctor tells my sister and my parents the information he has shared with me, and I am glad because it was too much and too medical for me, but I sit there while he explains to my husband and my family that it is just too late for me. I sob, I don't know why, or where the tears suddenly come from, but I cry. I am weak and tired and so thirsty.

My husband asks him where I got this from, how or when? He is being thorough. I understand but I don't care anymore. Every second that passes by, I feel a little bit of life leaving my body. After all the medical terms, the doctor sends me to the medical ward and tells me to rest as much as I can.

I hate hospitals. As I get into bed, my children try to help me, but my sons are older, so they manage better. The two girls are so young, and my baby barely understands what's happening. They all look scared because a few weeks ago their mother was making breakfast and sending them off to work and school. I am scared too; I admit it, but I can't show them my fear. My family is standing around me and they are crying and rubbing my arms or holding my hands. I don't like people touching me, they know this. They visit for hours and then they leave me, alone in this cold, isolated ward. I take out a pen and pad and I write them each a letter. This - for now, my family - is goodbye.

KATE'S POV:

My sister is amazing. I know she says the same about me. We are close and when I receive the call from her husband, my legs won't hold me up. We visit her at the hospital, and we just sit there for hours. I don't understand this thing we call life. Her children are all so young and they need their mother. I cry my heart out. We faff over her, and I know she is irritated; it makes me smile. She hates being the centre of attention. I look at my beautiful sister lying there, and I know that we are fortunate to be able to be with her like this, and I don't take that for granted. When it's time for us to leave, I can't pull myself away and I can't look her in her eyes. I wish we had more time.

I lie in the bath and all the memories come flashing back. Most of our memories are from when we were older. We grew closer and being married and having kids definitely helped. She once sat on the couch next to me and told me that I should never let any man disrespect me, and that if he was good enough for me, I would know. She loves my husband; she said I made a good choice. They were more like siblings than we were. They got along very well and had great respect for one another. One year we went on holiday, and I will never forget those memories. We were at the beach and the waves were really strong. My sister and I went into the sea, trying to prove a point. As we walked towards the water, she kept saying, "Just hold onto my arm and try not to fall over; they will laugh at us. We can do this." She was always so positive and tried really hard to be the best at everything. As soon as the first wave came, we were down. I nearly drowned I was laughing so hard. She has the best laugh.

I get out of the bath, and I write her a letter. I am too emotional to speak.

To my Pie,

As clichéd as it may sound, I don't know where to begin this letter; it's as if I'm falling short of words to express myself. So, I guess, I'll just start with a simple 'Thank you'.

Thank you for always being there and inspiring me every step of my life. For me you've donned many hats - in addition to that of a sister's - a mother's, an aunty's, a best friend's, a teacher's, and many more.

And I, on the other hand, have been the most annoying younger sister imaginable who has always been cranky, demanding, and a mess. While I took you for granted (and I still do) all through our childhood, as we grew older, I realised that I am the luckiest person in the whole wide world when it comes to having an older sister.

Thank you for being honest and even blunt when there was no other way. They are your honest opinions and they have saved me from ending up as a fashion disaster and a mean person in general.

Thank you for always looking out for me and being the pillar of my life, from all the parent-teacher meetings and up to my first party and beyond. You've always been the 2.0 version of our mommy - a classic combo of a best friend and mother. Although we have had our disagreements and fights, I know you've got my back and I hope you know I have yours too. There are so many people who refrained from hurting me just because they knew who is standing behind me.

Even though you and Wesley don't let go of even the slightest chance to laugh at me, I know you will always love me and accept me (not that you both have an option). Thank you for always believing in me, more than anyone else did. You are one of my biggest supporters. Who else would believe in me after listening to those unrealistic dreams that I lived with?

You don't know the amount of good influence you've had on me, and I can't thank you enough. And please note that I am immensely proud to have you as my sister; no one could ever fill in for you.

Lastly, I want to tell you that I love you and you will always be a part of me.

All my love,
Your Cake

That night my sister passed away. It was quick - sudden, unexpected. Our family was shattered. Her children were traumatised, and my parents devastated. She was only forty-two years old and the light of our lives. We knew it was coming, not quite as quickly as it did, but she was sick, so her days were numbered.

Grief, as I have always heard, comes in waves. That's a lie. These aren't waves; these are gargantuan freight trains that ram into your very soul, from nowhere. They come as you stand in the fruit aisle of the supermarket, looking around you, wondering how the hell anyone can manage to get on with life when this terrible thing has happened, and suddenly, from out of nowhere, that train comes hurtling at you. It feels as if someone has sucked out everything you have – your guts, your heart, your oxygen, your whole being. You continue filling your trolley with Granny Smiths, but it's there, and you never know when it will run into you next. You live in fear of that.

For a little while I didn't speak to any friends on the phone, for fear of breaking down. I only spoke to my parents, my husband, and to her children and mine. I came up with a nonsensical story of her now being an angel, *and* a star in the sky *and* that whenever the sky was pink in the morning, it meant she was saying hello. Now, whenever the sky is pink, her children look up to the sky. My husband feels uncomfortable with it; I don't ever know what to feel. But it was all I had at the time.

After we were told that my sister didn't have much time, it was the last time she and I ever looked each other in the eye. I knew she hated being touched and

faffed over, and we knew that if we ever locked our gazes, the tears would never stop. So, it was better that way. Now I regret that, I regret not grabbing her and looking at her, deep into her soul, and telling her how much I admired her bravery. How she was a warrior, a trooper, an inspiration, and a truly beautiful human being, and of course, how much love I had for her, but I didn't, and I hate myself for that. I know she knew, but did she *actually* know?

My sister's two greatest fears when she was ill were 1) being forgotten; 2) leaving behind any sadness. The first is just silly. The second not so silly. I was never one who feared death, really. I mean, I knew it would come, I just assumed it would be when I was an old lady, and I was fine with that. Now, I have a fear, in fact an utter terror, not so much of death, but for what happens after death to the people who remain - like us, her children, her family. The life change that happens to us the minute we find out that our loved one is going to die. Her worry for her beloved husband, bereft at losing the only girl he ever loved, the heartbreak of our lovely parents, the confusion of her nieces and nephews, and the sheer devastation of her friends of twenty-five years who just couldn't believe that their best mate would no longer be around when I broke the news to them. She never wanted us to be sad. But we are – so, so utterly filled with sadness.

What haunts me more than anything = more, even, than her not being here anymore - is the thought of the fear she faced alone. She faced the worst thing any person could ever face. She looked death in the eye, and it never let up. It was relentlessly wheedling its way into her life, and she dealt with that with absolute poise and composure. How she managed to control that fear is truly beyond me. My guilt that my sister, who I was supposed to protect my whole life, would be lying there at night while the world slept, knowing her drugs weren't working and she was dying. That destroys me. And when I saw my mother sobbing like a wounded animal at her grave, I knew it destroyed her too.

The secret stories that only we shared just evaporate, because they are too old or too weird to try to explain to anyone else. Every year we wrote exactly the same thing in each other's birthday cards, and howled with laughter each time we opened them, knowing full well what they would say, but there isn't any card to write now, so that joke just disappears forever.

Sometimes I feel anger towards my loving and sensitive three-year-old grandson when he carelessly throws something that was a gift from my sister on the floor. I shout and he gets frightened and doesn't understand. I have a paralysing fear of losing things such as the screw top of a cheap plastic bottle that she bought my grandson at Disneyland in July last year.

So, I guard every solitary thing she ever gave us as gifts over the years; I'm like a lioness with her cubs. And I feel blind panic and rage when one of those things is temporarily lost among the chaos. So, it's been hard. No doubt it is life changing. And what next? Well, we've been dreading December, of course. The month we share, Christmas, the time of happiness, love, family, and light. And yet for us there is none of that without her. We all have an underlying anxiety that while we slowly move toward the new year, desperate to see the back of this year that brought us so much sadness, we also fear entering a year not touched by her, moving further and further away from the last time we were a family, all present and together.

We will survive, though. Unlike her, we will survive. But we will forever live with a shade of darkness over us. A grey filter over our world forever.

CHAPTER 22

LILLY'S POV:

There is nothing left for us to say. I am confused and filled with conflicting emotions. When he lets me go, I feel the coldness of the room. It's dark and I am just standing there. I decide to pull myself together, fix my hair and apply some lip-gloss. I make sure Ty is covered nicely with a blanket before I go downstairs. I turn on the side lamp so that he is not in the dark room all by himself, and when I look up, I stare directly into the baby monitor.

I grab the stupid thing and I see the green light is on. I am well aware that the other end of the monitor is in a dining room full of people, and they must have heard what Miles and I were speaking about and - oh my word! - our whole moment. Shit, *Romeo!* I mean, dammit, Josh! I rush down the stairs and as I get closer to the dining room, they are laughing and talking, and no one seem affected. I walk in like nothing has happened and I see the other monitor but, thank God, the light is red. Someone turned it off. I breathe a breath of relief and thank God silently that it all worked out. I ended things with Miles, he knows I will always love Romeo, I mean Josh. Did I just say Romeo? I am with Josh, Josh is my boyfriend, what was I thinking? Miles and Lilly are no more. We are enjoying our meal. Our parents start lecturing us about sex and how to be safe, and my mum keeps saying we need to abstain, and William, Lee, Dillan, Selena, Miles, Romeo, Josh and I stand up from the table, excuse ourselves and almost

run outside. No one is ready to be asked in front of everyone who has done the deed and who hasn't.

We all find ourselves standing outside like idiots on the porch in the front yard. It's weird. Romeo lights a cigarette and walks off, sitting on a nearby bench. Josh and I head off in a different direction and while we walk, Josh says it's late and maybe he should be getting back to Granny Ola. We agreed that she shouldn't be alone, especially at night, so he goes to say goodnight to my parents while I wait to walk him to where he parked his car. I stand there, like a fool, looking around, until my eyes lock with Romeo's. He is just sitting there staring at me. His eyes tell me a story. I fall in love over and over and over again with this man. I know he loves me; I can see how much he loves me; he has even said he loved me while I was asleep, but still, it counts. We can't stay away from each other. We always end up around each other. Why does he keep hurting me? Why does he always find a way to break my heart? Josh comes back, pulling me from my dismayed thoughts. We walk to his car, and we kiss goodnight.

Josh and I say goodnight and he drives off. I just stand there because I don't have the courage to turn around and walk past the small crowd gathered on my path to the door. I am facing away from them when I feel him, his aura, behind me. I turn to find Romeo standing behind me.

Romeo: **"**Lilly, can we please talk? I just need a few minutes."
Lilly: "Romeo, please, just let me be."

He takes my hand, and the familiar electric shock runs through our bodies, and I close my eyes.

Romeo: "So you feel it too? I thought it was just me, all these years. This has been our sign, Lilly, that we are meant to be."
Lilly: "Yes, I feel it Romeo, and I know you always felt it too, but whenever you had the opportunity, you used it to break my heart." I withdraw my hand and I feel the hint of heartache. Just as I was about to say something, his big hands landed on my back and gently pulled me into his arms in an embrace. I

am surprised, is Romeo hugging me? He is acting weird. I lean against his sturdy chest and listen to his calm heartbeat, and we just stand there.

Romeo: "There is something you need to know."

Lilly: "Oh gosh, what now?"

Romeo: "Faith and I were never engaged, and she was never pregnant."

Lilly: "I am confused, so why did you tell me you were?"

Romeo: "It was Faith, she used my phone without my knowledge and sent you that message. I only found out recently. So, I left her and came home to you. The night you called me, that's the day she told me that she made it all up."

Lilly: "Only, you didn't come home to me, you never showed up."

Romeo: "It may not seem like it now, but I will win you back. I have always cared about you, Lilly; you are my future. I will do anything to have you back and I will wait for you. I will wait for you to be ready, and I will fight for your forgiveness. I know you are with that Josh guy right now and that's okay, explore your relationship with him, but he is not meant to be yours, I am. I know I've hurt you; I know I screwed up, but I will fix things, I will change."

Lilly: "Why do you always do this?" My eyes begin to blur, and I am snuggled in his arms like a kitten. He holds me even tighter, and after a long time, I raise my head from his arms and say goodnight. I'm just not ready to give my heart back to this man.

Romeo: "Goodnight, Angel."

Romeo's POV:

We are sitting at this table, and I am irritated, Miles has been gone far too long to just take a dump. William put off the baby monitor as soon as Lilly left, so I can't be sure, and it will seem weird if I turn the thing back on. Just as I want to get up and make sure he hasn't followed Lilly, he comes back. Out of nowhere. Our parents start lecturing us about sex and how to be safe, and Lilly's mum keeps saying we need to abstain, and like clockwork, everyone stands up from

the table and we go outside, avoiding our parents. I don't think anyone wants to disclose information on their sex lives. I look at Lilly and that arsehole clinging to her, and I pray to God that they haven't done it. The last time we spoke, she said she was a virgin.

We are all standing outside, and I can't stand seeing Lilly with someone else. I light a cigarette and find a place to sit down, away from them. As soon as I sit down, he leaves her alone and goes back inside. She's just standing there, and I can't take my eyes off her. Our eyes lock. God, she's beautiful. I am so madly in love with this woman. It is like we are having a conversation about some deep emotion with our eyes, and it's a very powerful level of attraction; It is like I am conveying the power of my feelings. Josh comes back and the spell is broken and now I don't like him even more. She walks him to his car, he is leaving. Good, it's late. They kiss goodnight and I am watching him like a hawk, he is such a loser. I watch him drive off and this is my chance. I get up and walk towards her, putting some distance between us and all our siblings.

Romeo: "Lilly, can we please talk, I just need a few minutes."

Lilly: "Romeo, please, just let me be."

I take her hand and the familiar electric shock runs through our bodies.

Romeo: "So you feel it too? I thought it was just me, all these years. This has been our sign, Lilly, that we are meant to be."

Lilly: "Yes, I feel it Romeo, and I know you always felt it too, but whenever you had the opportunity, you used it to break my heart."

She withdraws her hand and I feel empty. I can't stand this coldness between us, so I close the distance and I put my hands on her back and gently pull her into my arms. She leans against me, and I immediately calm down.

Romeo: "There is something you need to know."

Lilly: "Oh gosh, what now?"

Romeo: "Faith and I were never engaged, and she was never pregnant."

Lilly: "I am confused, so why did you tell me you were?"

Romeo: "It was Faith, she used my phone without my knowledge and sent you that message. I only found out recently. So, I left her

and came home to you. The night you called me, that's the day she told me." I am practically rambling.

Lilly: "Only, you didn't come home to me, you didn't show up."

Romeo: "It may not seem like it now, but I will win you back. I have always cared about you, Lilly; you are my future. I will do anything to have you back and I will wait for you. I know you are with that Josh guy right now and that's okay, explore your relationship with him, but he is not meant to be yours, I am. I know I've hurt you; I know I screwed up, but I will fix things, I will change."

Lilly: "Why do you always do this?" My eyes begin to blur, and I am snuggled in his arms like a kitten. He holds me even tighter and after a long time, I raise my head from his arms and say goodnight. I'm just not ready to give my heart back to this man.

Romeo: "Goodnight, Angel."

I watch her walk away from me and I almost fall to my knees. I am sitting there, crouched on my heels and contemplating letting her walk away from me and losing her, or going after her. I let it go. We sit outside for another hour or so and our parents' bedroom lights go off; it is getting quite late. Will and D' take their girlfriends home and the rest of us head upstairs. I am lying in my new bedroom for the next few weeks, and it is killing me knowing Lilly's bedroom is like twenty feet from me.

The week has flown by, and it is Friday night. It hasn't been too bad living with the Lilly and her family. It was great coming home from work and seeing Lilly at the dinner table every night. We have become a lot more comfortable too. We speak more and we are no longer cold strangers. My parents and Lilly's parents are going away for the weekend; they have also included William's son, their only grandson. We are alone this weekend, and the timing is perfect. I overheard Lilly fussing on the phone that Josh has to work so he won't be around, and he hasn't been by all week to see her. She is frustrated with him, and they have been fighting a lot.

I get home from work and William, Miles, Dillan and I are off to the liquor store to buy some drinks while Lee, Lilly, Selena and a new girl, Sky - a very odd name, but I don't care what her name is, she is very into Miles and that means he might leave my girl alone - they are all in Lilly's room, laughing and giggling. Tonight, we party.

The sun has set, and we order pizza, a lot of pizza. We are sitting in the pool room, and this is where Lilly and I had our last kiss. The girls decide that they want to get into the hot tub. Everyone is excited, drunk, and extremely comfortable. The girls all get changed and the guys all strip, right on the spot. I look up at the sky in the back yard and everyone comes back and joins their partners, but Lilly hasn't returned yet. Lee, Selena, and Sky all come back with towels, and they run and squeal and join their boyfriends. It takes Lilly ten more minutes before she joins us, and she comes out of the pool house with a blue swimsuit that makes me extremely uncomfortable. My breathing has quickened, and I can't stand up to help her into the hot tub because I will expose where my thoughts went when she walked out of that door. My throat is dry, and I swallow nervously. This damn woman is hot. She has thick thighs, and her boobs are outrageously big. She has a belly ring and at a closer glance, I see it is a butterfly that is detailed with blue diamonds. She gets in and sits down next to me. Her body is unforgiving. We sit in the hot tub and talk, it's good to catch up. We are all in a heated debate about the weather. This is just drunk conversation. The girls are drinking wine and the guys whisky.

Almost an hour later. Miles and Sky have disappeared into the main house, and I can guess what they're doing. Lee and William got changed, and they are sitting around the fire making the hubbly. Dillan had to take Selena home; her dad called, and he was furious. Lilly and I are still chatting away and eating pizza in the hot tub.

Lilly: "My fingers look like prunes, let's go change."
Romeo: "I am wrinkled too." We both laugh.

We go into the pool house to get changed. She suddenly stops right in front of me and asks me to help her untie the clip of her swimsuit, and if I touch her

now, I won't let go. I slowly unclip her top and she holds it up so it doesn't expose her, and I can't resist anymore. I twist her body to face me, and I kiss her with my whole being. I am a normal man: I can't resist seeing her half naked and guarantee that I can suppress my desire. My desire won, obviously. We are drunk and out of control. I pick her up and carry her to the bed. My male hormones are shouting wildly, but I take a deep breath and it takes almost everything for me to stop and ask her if she wants to be with me tonight. She nods yes and that's enough for me.

She starts rubbing my thigh and I grab her hand and bite her thumb. I am kissing her neck and grabbing her arse, we are kissing like we are hungry. It is wild and exciting. She lets her top fall to the floor, and I am practically jumping out of my skin, I am really excited now. We are naked within seconds but then she suddenly stops me. She just looks at me for what feels like a very long time, and I am just standing there waiting for her cue. I want her to be at peace with her decision and I want her to give me the okay on what she is comfortable with and what she isn't ready for yet. I am so nervous just waiting and waiting…...

Lilly: "We need to slow down."
Romeo: "Okay, that's fine, are you okay?"
Lilly: "No, honestly, I am scared."
Romeo: "Why? Do you want to stop? We don't have to do this."
Lilly: "Because this will be my first time."
Romeo: "Ooh." That's about all I can manage.

I am rejoicing inside because I know now that she hasn't done it with Josh, but then my excitement dies. Do I want to take this from her? I don't think I am deserving. I sit there and wait for her to make a choice.

Lilly: "I don't want to stop just yet. Can we just slow down?"

Romeo: "Yes, Lilly, whatever you need." We lie on the bed, and I can see she is nervous. I trace her forehead with my finger and ask her to trust me.

CHAPTER 23

LILLY'S POV:

Romeo asked me to spend the night with him. I put my hand in his and accept. I know I am a little drunk, but I have loved this man my whole life. If I lose my virginity to him, I will be okay with it, even if we don't end up together. He was and is an important part of my life. He pulls me up and into his arms and he runs his fingers down my neck. My blood flames and I can feel my cheeks heat up. I know I am blushing. "Please, Lilly, let me make love to you."

I whisper yes, because at this moment, this is what I really want. I know I am young, eighteen years old, with no experience at all. I know I will be judged, but most of my peers are no longer virgins. *Don't overthink this,* I repeat over and over in my head.

He smiles down at me and I am so nervous. After all these years, this is it. My breathing is loud. I am looking at him and then he asks me if I am using any contraceptive. It's such a personal question but I understand why he has to ask, so I answer him honestly and say no. He gets up and takes a condom out of his jeans and now my blood is pumping. "Do you have any idea how much I want you, Lilly?" he whispers, and I close my eyes. He kisses me again and again and again; he pulls me close against his naked chest and it is the most intimate feeling I have ever felt - my nipples against his hard chest. He runs his hand down my waist and down to my backside.

I want him so badly. Gripping his upper arms, I feel his biceps; I love his arms. He has the best shoulders.

He sits up and he's staring down at me.

"You're very beautiful, Lilly."

Holy shit. Am I ready? I think to myself.

Slowly, he opens my legs and crawls between them. I feel so needy, and I don't know what to expect, but I have been to second base before and this is way, way better. He starts kiss on my nipples, and I look up at him. His eyes are closed, and I almost melt watching him lick, suck and bite me, it is so erotic.

He sits and yanks my swimsuit off and throws it on the floor. I feel a hot sensation between my legs. I am wet. He puts his finger inside me, and I cry out as he does it again and again. He reaches for the condom and then he asks me if I am ready. I almost beg him but then I remember my manners. I nod my head yes and he slowly enters me.

"Aargh!" I shout, and he looks down at me and stops. "You okay?" It was a short, sharp pain, and I was a little over dramatic, but I nod yes, and he starts to move. Oh my, this is exquisite. I want this. He moves so slowly, and he is so gentle. My eyes are closed tight when I feel him come closer to me, pushing himself deeper. He is now coaxing my body and he whispers in my ear, "Finally." My legs stiffen. Holy hell, what's happening to me? I hear him tell me to "Let go." *Oh my…* I didn't know it would feel like this and I explode. He comes as well, and I am well aware that I am screaming really loudly. I hope no one can hear us. That was amazing. He falls down next to me and I finally open my eyes. I start to panic, I don't know where to look, I feel shy and embarrassed, and then I start scanning the room. I have been in here over a million times but today I am looking. The walls are white, and the furnishings are pale blue, and on the wall is an exceptionally large mirror and two paintings of the ocean.

Unexpectedly, he speaks.

Romeo: "You okay?"

I nod yes. I can feel him smiling and I don't really know what to do here.

Romeo: "Did I hurt you?"

I shake my head no, now he chuckles.

Romeo: "Any regrets?"

I shake no, he laughs.

"Lilly are you ever going to look at me?"

I shake no, he laughs again and kisses me on the side of my mouth. We just lie there. I start tracing the sheet below me with my fingers and then I find… "Romeo, why is the condom still closed?"

He shifts onto his elbow and looks to where the condom is lying. Abruptly, he jumps up, "Shit, Lilly. In the heat of the moment, I must have forgotten."

Lilly: "How the hell can you forget?"
Romeo: "When you said you were ready, I got excited, and I just… forgot."
Lilly: "Damnit, Romeo!" I sit up and now I'm annoyed but I know that this is my fault too.
Romeo: "Please don't be mad."
Lilly: "I'm not mad. It's okay. I will handle it." he looks at me so sheepishly that I let it go.

And then it's quiet, and we just lie there. After what feels like hours - okay, probably minutes – later, he gets up and tells me he will get the hubbly ready outside and something for us to drink. He wants to give me some privacy. As soon as he leaves, I get up and take the sheets with me to the bathroom. I start the shower and my mind drifts to how those fingers have expertly handled and caressed my

body. I flush and gasp at the memory and press my thighs together. I shake my head and take a hot shower. I can never let Millicent find these sheets. I wash, dress, and then put the sheets in the washing machine to get the blood out. There is so much blood I am shocked. I come back to the lounge of the pool room and Romeo tells me everyone is sleeping. I breathe a sigh of relief. It would have been embarrassing to face everyone in the morning after all the noise I just made. I can't believe I am so loud during sex.

We have some cold pizza, mango juice and smoke a hubbly, and when the machine rings that the sheets are done, Romeo gets up and he helps me by fetching the sheets and putting them up to dry. I smile sweetly while I watch him because when we are together this man is perfect. He is so sweet and romantic and I am madly in love with him. He catches me staring at him and his expression is unreadable. He has changed into PJ bottoms and he is not wearing a T-shirt; hmmm, sexy. His pants hang from his hips, he has strong arms and shoulders, narrow hips, and his abdominal muscles look like six sexy stones. He has changed a lot since I last saw him topless. Once back in bed we are soon asleep, and I am happy, content, and relaxed.

Romeo's POV:

Lilly is still asleep when I wake up. She is a really terrible sleeper; her head is on her pillow, but her legs are on my side of the bed. It is almost 8am and the sound of her phone vibrating woke me. I check her phone and I see that Josh has called twice already so I turn the damn thing off. The guys are on breakfast duty this morning, so I go to wake Miles, Dillan, and William. They are always on about us never doing anything properly, so I want to prove a point with this breakfast. I wake up the guys and they are ready and good to go. All the ladies are asleep, and the morning has been perfect so far. I am so happy and in my element. I love Lilly and I will win her over, I know she is officially with Josh but that shit needs to end; I will give her space and time, but I won't wait forever, and they are definitely not kissing again. I don't want to share her. She's mine now. I want to make her happy and I want to secure our future. The music is blasting in the kitchen, and everyone has a specific job to do.

William is completely useless behind the stove, but he is like a caffeine machine, so he is making tea, coffee and juice; Miles is making the toast; and I am frying the bacon. Dillan is the chef; he is the youngest, but he cooks really well, so he is making fried mushrooms, eggs, and has prepared something he calls a cherry-berry-chai-something. We laugh at him, tease him, and mock him. He doesn't care much. My cellphone rings and I take the call outside because it is work.

I work for a well-established law firm, and I have been saving to start my own practice. My dad could have given me the money a long time ago and man, did he offer, but I want this to be on my own merits. Everything is in place, and this is the last phone call to give me all my approvals, or they can deny me. I want to be successful, and I do like money - who doesn't? Lilly is used to having a good life, and if I want her in my life, I have to be able to provide for her. She might not even need my money, she is hard-working and I know she will give me the speech of having her own. The thought makes me smile. I am a man, and this is my responsibility. I take the call and my day has been made: I have been approved, my building is ready and waiting, and I even have staff waiting to be employed. There is one catch, I need to go abroad to another country for two weeks. The chief judge has been holding this favour over my head for many years and he is finally calling it in. If I do this, I will be the Managing Partner of my own law firm. I have worked my arse off for this and it would be so stupid to give it up now, but… Lilly! I need to speak to her; two weeks is a long time.

As soon as I drop the call all the ladies come down for breakfast and we sit down and enjoy the meal. I can't take my eyes off Lilly. Dillan is happy because all the ladies went for his cherry-berry-whatever. It is yoghurt with berries and chai, that's it but they all opted for that meal. There is a loud noise at the door. We all go silent for a split second but then I go for my gun and William grabs a kitchen knife. With Jessica's parents out to get us, we are all on high alert. Lilly has pressed the alarm and we all just stand there waiting, when Amy burst into the house, looking like a train wreck. What the hell is wrong with this woman?

Her hair is all wet and dirty, she looks like she crawled through a pile of mud. All her clothes are dirty and smudged with brown sand and she is barefoot. I cautiously walk towards her and speak to her as if she is a wounded animal.

Everything is happening in slow motion when she abruptly flings something she had been holding in her hand, it hits me directly on the head and that's it, I am furious. Amy knows better. I stare her down. I stand there and give Amy 'the look.' She knows not to disrespect me. I bend down and pick up what she threw at me and it's a pregnancy test. A positive pregnancy test.

Amy: "I'm pregnant."

We all stand there shocked and silent. I am just standing there with the test in my hand. I look to the table and as usual Dillan and William are eating and not bothered by what is unfolding. I don't have the courage, but I know I have to, so I shift my head and look at Lilly and she is crying. I mean, she is broken.

I have finally destroyed her.

CHAPTER 24

Lilly's POV:

What a hell of a surprise, Amy sure has great timing. All my friends sat with me once again while I cried my eyes out, once again, because Romeo broke my heart once again. I was so naïve last night, thinking that this was my forever, but I just ended up with a broken heart and a lost virginity. Selena, Lee, and Sky have gone home. Dillan, Miles, and William are in the pool house, drinking and probably talking about Romeo and his new family. Romeo left with Amy. I don't care anymore; I don't want to. I throw my hairbrush against my mirror and scream; maybe I just need to throw a tantrum and I'll feel better. I know this sounds selfish and I know I am no better than Romeo now, but I miss Josh. I wish he was here. I kneel down with tears in my eyes and start picking up the pieces from the broken mirror. This is the thing about tantrums, they are useless and just add more work to your already emotional day. I run myself a bath and get dressed - when you look good, you always feel good. I know Josh will be home in about an hour from his business trip and he must be exhausted. I can't believe I cheated on him. Since he left for his trip, my routine was to go to school, come home and help Millicent prepare supper. I would dish out some food and take it to Granny Ola and I would sit with her for a while. So, today will be no different. I will go over to Granny Ola, only this time I will cook supper over there.

I am wearing black jeans and a yellow top. I am singing and walking down the stairs, planning a meal in my mind. When Romeo comes back tonight, I won't be here, and that gives me some solace. I grab my keys and open the door and

I scream from fear and surprise when I see Josh standing there with a bunch of flowers.

Romeo's POV:

I am driving Amy home; my mind is all over the place. We are both quiet and she really doesn't smell good. We get to her house and her parents are home. Good, I am a man, and I will take responsibility. We go inside and her parents are shocked by her appearance. Her mum takes her to have a bath and get her cleaned up. I sit down with her dad and her mum joins us a few minutes later. She tells me Amy will be with us in a few and asks me what happened.

Romeo: "Mrs Heslop, you have known me for many years, and I have never disrespected your family. I am as confused as you are, and I don't really know what happened. Amy and I haven't been together for a few months now and she came to my friend's house and gave me this."

I hand her the pregnancy test and they look at it in shock. They are happy, and that shocks me. My parents are probably going to skin me alive.

Romeo: "Mr Heslop, I want you to know that I will take full responsibility and I will take care of Amy and this baby."

Amy sits down next to me, and she looks normal again, and by normal, I mean clean. I continue, "Like I said, I will take full responsibility and this baby will want for nothing, but I am in love with someone else and Amy and I will not be a couple. I will take care of the baby and you don't have to worry about anything, but I don't see a future with your daughter. I have said that Amy and I haven't been together for a few months now, but I would like to take her to a doctor tomorrow and make sure she gets all the vitamins she needs. She will be my first priority until the baby gets here."

Mr Heslop: "Romeo, son. You and Amy have been in a relationship for years now, on and off. You were teenagers when you met. I respect you coming to see us, young man, and taking full responsibility, but we need to speak to your parents, and the two of you will have to get married. That is the right way."

Romeo: "Please excuse my language, Sir, but I don't think so. Fuck, no!"

Amy: "What has gotten into you, Romeo?"

Romeo: "You have always known how much I have loved Lilly, and yes, I was never ready to be with her, but I am now. Things are finally okay between Lilly and me, and I won't let this mess things up between us. I am sorry, Amy, don't be mad. I have to go now; I will fetch you tomorrow, we can talk, and we can go see a doctor, okay?"

I say good night and leave their home. *They must really be crazy if they think I am going to get married because my parents say so,* I laugh to myself. I walk to the gate and before I get into my car, my cellphone rings, then I feel a sharp blow and it goes dark, like pitch black. Someone put a bag over my head, and I am knocked out.

Tessa's POV:

It has been two months since I got engaged and things are so different between us, although maybe it's all in my head. He has been travelling for work since our engagement, he is never home and I am lonely. They have selected three new interns for me to train at work tomorrow, and I am not looking forward to this at all. I am sitting and looking at their employment files and trying to get to know these people. There is a young girl who is only twenty-one who has great academic results, I am excited about her. There is a guy who is also twenty-one. And the last one's name is Theo Adin, he is twenty-six. I close my eyes and remember the grey dress I took out to wear to work tomorrow and that just won't do. I get out of bed and go looking for something better to wear.

I opt for my shift, a new length short-sleeved burgundy dress with a round neck, and my burgundy heels. This dress always makes me look sexy and professional.

The next day comes like an unanticipated storm, fast and unexpected. I shower, apply my make-up, get dressed and grab an apple. I get to work, and my boss is waiting for me in my office. I am surprised and scared; did I do something wrong? I have had interns before and he has never waited for me to introduce them.

When I walk in, he hands me my coffee and immediately starts, "Tessa, we want to promote you. Promotions encourage our employees, and to be quite frank, we like taking care of our own when they do a good job for us. You have been outstanding during these last few months, so you are to become one of the senior managers. You are promotional material." He laughs, more at his own joke, and I am just sitting there with my mouth open. "You have been doing a good job in the position you are in, and we will fill your position by the end of this week. In addition, I want to praise you on your Job performance, which makes this a 'no brainer'. Simply put, we only promote the best we have, not average or poor performers. I have always opted for you as the manager who knows how to build strong client relationships and has a track record of delivering business value to our business operation and clients. Are you prepared for the next level of responsibility?"

He doesn't give me a chance to answer or to even say anything. He just continues and says, "When counselling your employees or interns, prepare them with your skill set and they won't fail you. You will find your new salary offer in this folder and everything you need to know. We will also be paying for you to move homes, we need you closer to the office, and you will get a company car as well as a bonus of one hundred thousand rand that will be paid into your bank account today, after you have signed all the paperwork and accepted, off course. We have considered your son Troy also, and because so many of the other female mums need it too, the company would like to have a day-care started here. I hope this gives you some things to think about as you make efforts to advance your career and move to the next level."

He stands up, indicating that we are done, and shakes my hand. I haven't said a word and he is leaving my office. He stops at the door and says, "Oh Tessa, get your interns to pack up your office. I am moving you to your own floor." I want

to smack myself to make sure that I am not still in bed. I immediately call Zane, but he doesn't answer. I haven't spoken to him in two weeks. I am starting to lose my mind. I need him today. As I am about to leave my office, my boss returns with the interns and tells them to pack up my office and wait for my instructions. He winks at me and leaves, now I want to cry. This is all too much.

Intern 1: "Excuse me, Ma'am, "can I get you some fresh coffee?" She takes my cold cup of coffee and goes running off. I didn't even say yes. I just roll my eyes.

Intern 2: "Hi." I shake his hand and smile; he has thick glasses and freckles, red hair, and acne. He looks like a teenager.

Tessa: "Go to the warehouse downstairs and get boxes please," I say to the second Intern, and off he runs. I want to laugh but I remember how it felt being the new kid, and I take mercy on them.

Intern 3: "Good morning, my name is Theo Adin."

Tessa: Oh, shit. I forgot there was a third one, but then I look up - and I mean up, this man is tall. How could I forget he was there? Who is this sexy monster in my office? "Hi Theo, could you start with that bookshelf, please?"

Theo: "Yes, no problem."

Tessa: He has these dark devil eyes that make me want to commit a sin. He walks over to the bookshelf and starts unpacking the top shelf. I am staring at his backside - not looking, staring. Yummy! I shake my head; I need to be professional.

The other two interns return, and we spend the day packing up my office. At lunch time, I give them a break and treat them to lunch, it's the least I can do. I check my phone and Zane hasn't called me or even texted; I don't even know if he is okay. I text him and just say, "Hey, at least let me know I don't have to worry. Are you okay?" minutes later he responds, "Hey, yes, fine thanks."

I don't know what to do so I just ignore him and decide that if he wants to talk to me, he will call. I am done with begging him for his attention. I turn my focus on the interns and tell them that tomorrow will be more productive and they

all say today was fun and I am a great leader. They are so eager, and I love their energy. We sit and eat and talk. The intern with the thick glasses and red hair is no nerd. He tells us about his girlfriend and how they love to party. We all laugh because no one expected that, and we learn not to judge a book by its cover. The afternoon flies by and when 4pm comes, I send them home, but Theo offers to stay late and help me move all the boxes to the end of the room, so tomorrow the guys from the warehouse can carry everything downstairs easily. Lord, help me.

CHAPTER 25

Two months later

Lilly's POV:

I am sitting in my bedroom and waiting for my results from college. I keep checking my computer and the anxiety is killing me. What makes it worse is that my dad keeps coming into my room, looking for an update from me. Josh comes over and I didn't expect him home so early, it is strange.

Lilly: "Hey, Babe, what are you doing home so early?" I am sitting on my bed, barefoot and anxious.

Josh: "Hey, Monkey, I took off from work, I wanted to surprise you. I know your results come in today and I knew you would be sitting here stressing about it, so we are going for ice cream. Put some shoes on, let's go." I smile because I know she hates it when I call her 'my monkey'.

Lilly: "Josh, I can't leave, I would just worry even more, and stop calling me a monkey." He sits down on my bed and rolls his eyes at me.

Josh: "I knew you would say that, but you can't sit like this all day, Baby."

Lilly: "No, I can't leave."

Josh: "Yes, you can. Let's go."

I knew she wouldn't go with me, Lilly is stubborn, but I have back up. She is still refusing so I text Ola and she knows what to do. On cue, Lilly's phone rings.

Lilly: "Josh, you are so mean. This is foul play." I answer the phone; this woman is my weakness: Granny Ola wants to see me. I mouth to Josh that I know what he is up to, and he just smiles. I put my shoes on and we leave my house, and we go over to Granny Ola's. When I get there, she has ice cream ready, and I love this old lady. We end up talking for hours and I forget about my results. She actually tells me that when Josh was little, he used to say that he would have a wife with long hair and big boobs. Ola said that it used to make her laugh and it seems he is keeping to his word. I cover my boobs from embarrassment, and we all laugh.

I get home later that day and my dad, mum and Will are waiting for me with balloons. The Kales have all gone back home, so it is just my family; Will has a small congratulations banner, and at first, I am confused but then it hits me, "I passed?" I ask my family, just to be sure and they are all cheering. YES! I have finally completed my first year. Josh hugs me and I run up to my room to see how I did. We celebrate with some champagne, and an hour later Will bids us goodnight and says he has to get Ty home and Josh leaves with them.

I am so tired, and everyone has either gone home or is in bed and all I want is my pyjamas and my pillow. I look for my pjs and I see my pads. Oh my GOD, I am LATE! I didn't get my period this month. I look at my period app on my cellphone and I last got my period in September. We are in the beginning of November. Oh, my LORD! I need to get a pregnancy test. Shit, after Romeo and I… oh, I can't even string a sentence together! I said, I would take care of it. He forgot the condom and I said I would take care of it, and I didn't. I forgot!

The next day, I wake up and I don't eat or wash. I go to the pharmacy in my pjs, and I buy a pregnancy test. I drive home again, and I am silently praying that I am not pregnant. I am only eighteen and have just completed my first year of college. *Should have thought about that sooner,* I think to myself. Maybe it is

the stress from the exams and waiting for my results. I don't know, but I really, really, really hope we can rule this out as stress. I get home and take two stairs at a time, rushing to the bathroom, I have to first read the instructions, this is the first pregnancy test I have ever taken. I am in my en suite bathroom, and I know no one is home. Millicent is in the laundry room; Marsha is at a friend's house and my parents are at work, so I am alone. I sit down and pee on the stick, the instructions say to then leave it for five minutes on a flat surface, so I put it on my bathroom floor, and I go to the other side of the bathroom to run some bath water. I turn around and Josh is standing in the doorway, looking down at the pregnancy test.

Oh floor, please crack open and swallow me up!

Jessica Smith is the girl who died many years ago; it has been said that she died by suicide. Her parents Pink and Wayne Smith are two famous actors who had only one daughter, Jessica. When she died, she was twenty-five years old, and this is her story.

Jessica's POV

I think back to the day I met him. I was sitting by the pool in my gold bikini, and I was reading a book. My parents are rich so I don't have to work but my dad insisted that I go to college and get a finance degree so that I could handle their finances and carry some responsibility. I've had a few boyfriends. My longest relationship was around two years. We lived together but we were at different places in our lives and had a bit of an awkward, drawn-out break-up. It left me pretty down for about six months or so. I went inside for a drink, and I heard the doorbell. I opened the door and Mr Edward, my dad's golf buddy, was standing there. I have always found him attractive; he looks good for his age. My dad is a lot older than he is, but they have been good friends for years. I know he is married, and so many people have strong feelings about women my age getting involved with married men, but, well, if he isn't eating at home I might as well feed him.

Jessica: "My dad will be home in a few minutes, Mr Kale, come inside."
Edward: "Call me Edward, Jessica, I have told you this many times."
Jessica: "Can I get you anything?"
Edward: "Yes, you can go put on some clothes and a beer would be nice, thank you."
Jessica: "Don't you like my bikini, Edward?"

I smiled and winked, and I think that was his undoing. Edward and I have been flirting since I moved back home, and even though he tried to act normal around my dad, and he would never say anything directly, I always knew this man wanted me. He has always been upfront about his wife, and I am aware of her. When Edward came over, he always complained to my dad about his wife and how much they fought, and he was miserable. She is too demanding, and I knew that one day we would be together to heal each other, so I fell into the abyss.

His wedding band annoyed me. I went to fetch his beer and I remember how I deliberately swayed my hips as I walked, because I knew he was watching me. Somehow, he always came over when my dad wasn't home and we became friends, well, sort of. Becoming friends with someone I desperately wanted to make love to was torture.

His phone rang and it was my dad telling Edward that he wouldn't be home and he couldn't make their game. They spoke for a minute, and he hung up and told me he was leaving. I walked him to the door and before he left, I asked for a hug goodbye. He entertained me and I was so happy, it was just fun. I was toying with him but then he hugged me, and it was like nothing I had ever felt before. Our intimacy level catapulted us into the stratosphere. I couldn't let go, I didn't want to let go, and thankfully he didn't. All I knew was that he had planted something powerful inside me. I admired him and I developed a bond with another woman's husband. He left and went home.

Four long weeks later, I will never forget where I was when the call came. So unexpected that I didn't immediately know it was him. As his voice filled my car, it felt like my soul did too, wrapping me up in the glow of his obvious desire. It was obvious how hard it had been for him to call. He asked me to meet him

for coffee and I agreed. Suddenly we were facing each other at a small table in a dimly lit café and we had absolutely nothing to talk about. It was a game-changer. I wanted to kiss him so badly it hurt.

As I sat there, I suddenly felt violently ill. I thought it must be a heart attack as the physical jolt was so strong. He told me simply that he needed to talk to me, and I knew. I knew instantly what for. Suddenly the fun and games had ended, and the situation felt unnervingly serious. It was truly the first time that I had suffered crippling stage fright. I had rehearsed a very short question, and all I needed to do was get through it. But as he sat there before me, thoughtful, gentle, and anticipating my response, I found I couldn't speak a word, or breathe, or cope.

Jessica: "Tell me this can't happen," I whispered.
Edward: "I can't tell you that. I think you know how I feel about you."
Jessica: The café quickly became the car. I wanted to touch him more than breathe. I remember I reached out and held his hand, it was the most intimate thing I had ever felt. I was already madly in love with him, and yet we hadn't even slept together, we hadn't even kissed.

We spent six amazing months together. He made promises, said he would leave his wife and we would be together forever. We eventually had sex whenever we could. He would take me on business trips, I would sneak out to be with me him at night, and then I couldn't imagine my life without him.

Eventually, a year into our affair on a Friday night, he told me to pack my bags and meet him at his house on the Sunday morning at 11am. We were going to elope, and he would just send Lisa the divorce papers. I did as he asked but the very next day, he sent me a text saying that it was over, and I needed to move on. I couldn't believe it; I didn't want to. Sunday morning came and I decided to go ahead with our plan; maybe Lisa had sent those messages, but when I got to his house, I saw him laughing with his family and leaving the premises. I backed up and tried to hide my car. I followed them, they went to church, and I sat in the car for two hours and just waited. While I waited, I remembered the letter I

wrote to him last night asking him not to leave me, but I forgot it under my bed. Shit! I really wanted to give it to him.

Jessica's mum, Jade's POV:

My daughter went to bed a normal young woman, on a normal evening. I would never have guessed that a few hours later, on a Sunday afternoon, it would be the start of my worst nightmare.

Every waking moment I replay that night over and over in my mind.

I went into her bedroom, and she was writing a letter and crying. I kept asking her to talk to me, but she just told me to leave her alone and give her some space. She was an adult; I didn't want to smother her, so I left her bedroom. When I went in to check on her again, her door was locked and she just shouted, "I am fine, Mum." I left it, figuring that the next day she would feel better, and we would talk. There was music playing and she seemed back to her old self.

Sunday morning came. I woke up and went to find Jessica, but her room was empty, her clothes were gone and there was no sign of her. No note, nothing. I called my husband and the maid, and we all started looking for her, it felt like forever. Hours later, I got the call.

I wish I had been taking more pictures. I wish I had gone into her bedroom last night and begged her to speak to me. We got to the scene, and I couldn't wait to see her in an ambulance being resuscitated, but instead I saw my baby's body covered with a body bag, and I knew, I knew I had lost her, yet I didn't want to believe it. I ran to her already cold body, and I screamed and I cried. I sat there for I don't know how long, and I kept telling her I loved her, but it was too late. The police officer took me to her car. My husband and I saw all her clothes on the back seat, and lying in the road, bags everywhere, but I just didn't care. How was I supposed to even think about life without my daughter? It wasn't fair!

Five years after her passing, I decided it was time; for a long time I wasn't ready, but then, on that fateful day, it was just time. I finally stepped into her bedroom and started packing up all her things. I cried; it broke my heart and I asked myself how many times I would have to put my daughter in boxes. First her body, now her belongings. I hated it. When I moved her bed, I found a letter, and I was so shocked. I hoped the letter would give me some answers, I hoped the letter was addressed to me, but it wasn't.

Dear Edward

Love of my life, you are the first thing I think of when I wake up and I'm looking forward to a life where I will wake up next to you, not needing to imagine you, because you will be sleeping right there next to me. I want to spend the rest of my life sleeping next to you and I can't imagine it otherwise. I can't wait for you to leave Lisa; you promised you would.

You are the love of my life. You're the only person in the whole world that can lift my spirits when I'm sad by giving me one single hug that means the world to me. You're the only one that I think of 24/7 when I wake up, when I go to sleep, and every second in between.

My Pudding, I am the happiest woman alive because I have you.

There wouldn't be a 'me' without you or a 'you' without me. We were meant to watch the sunrise in the morning together, for the rest of our lives.

We were meant to be there for each other, to fight for our love, and never stop fighting no matter what. I love you ! Don't leave me. We will last forever. I know that you are much older than me and my dad is your friend, but we will make this work.

Love forever
Jessica Smith

I ran down the stairs, crying, screaming, angry, sad, confused. I somehow needed my husband to confirm what I had just read. He read the letter and all I remember him saying was, "I'll kill him." I didn't stop him, I didn't want to, someone had to pay.

We started scheming and planning and spent money to get our revenge, but nothing really worked, until… we met SCARFACE. He helped us get something tangible - someone useful.

CHAPTER 26

Tessa's POV:

Time has gone by so fast. Today is going to be a busy day, it is Friday, and I don't like working over the weekends. Weekends are my time with Troy. Fridays, I push for results and completed tasks. The girl intern, I always forget her name, is so efficient with my reports - when I get off the elevator on my floor, she is waiting with my coffee in one hand and a folder in her other. She will make a great PA. This is their final month as my intern, and I am definitely keeping her with me.

The other male intern has been a disappointment; he didn't make the cut. He was always late or drunk. We had to let him go. I am the Creative Director of the graphic design team and I have ten employees under me now, reporting to me, looking up to me, so I can't deal with lazy employees. Theo Adin - gorgeous Theo - has been a great surprise. At *Secret Games and Co*. we create, design, and develop video games, and I love my job. We had our weekly meeting and one of the Art Directors and his team couldn't get the colour I wanted on the main character, which was a dragon. Theo then asked permission to try, and I was so impressed. Don't dare judge me, I wasn't biased, he mastered the blue I pictured in my head. The man has skills, okay?

It has been weeks since Zane has even held a fifteen-minute conversation with me. We say hi, talk for a few minutes and then he has to go, or he hangs up. I have given up on trying to speak to him and trying to save our relationship. I

am taking everything he does and says with a pinch of salt; I am sick and tired of crying every night.

These last few weeks at work we have thrown ourselves into working hard and today is submission day, everything has to go well. We work all day, and every Friday lunch is on me. My team only comprises five people. Myself, my intern who is my PA now, Theo who will be my illustrator, and another lady who is the motion graphic artist, but she doesn't sit with us, and lastly Mike, he is the 2D/3D animator.

We have lunch and get back to work. At 3pm I send my PA home, there is really nothing left for her to do. The sun sets, and as per my usual routine, I call the nanny and tell her I will be late, and I speak to Troy for a few minutes. We submitted our project on time, so I am happy. I want my PA to come back because I need coffee really badly; I chuckle to myself because she has really spoilt me. I see that it is dark outside, I have always hated driving alone at night, but I've gotten used to it and it's not really so bad. The security guard walks me to the car so even the parking lot isn't that bad. I start to put my papers aside and a loud noise scares the shit out of me. Suddenly Theo appears and starts apologising. Fuck! I nearly threw my stapler at him.

Tessa: "What are you still doing here?" I try to steady my heart.

Theo: "I am so sorry, Tessa, I accidently dropped some files; are you okay?" This woman will be the death of me, she is so gorgeous, and she doesn't even know it.

Tessa: "No, dammit. I nearly had a heart attack, I thought everyone had left."

Theo: "No, Mike and I were editing some touch-ups to the new project, he just left. I was putting away the files and getting ready to leave too."

Tessa: "Oh, okay good. Don't you have a girlfriend or a family or a mum, or something? You are always here late, and I don't want problems." He starts walking towards me and my heart rate picks up.

Theo: "I am happily single, and I don't live with my mum." I love flirting with Tessa, she acts like she doesn't know what's happening between us, but I know she does.

Tessa: "Okay, I am also getting ready to leave." He is smiling, and stops right in front of me, Theo is so tall that I have to look up at him and when he is this close. Oh my, I can smell his aftershave. For a second, I close my eyes. Shit, I hope he didn't see that.

Theo: "I'm starving, would you like to grab something to eat before we head home?" *And by something to eat, I mean you, Baby,* I think to myself.

Tessa: "Yes." Shit, that was too quick, I should have at least pretended to think about it.

Theo: "Cool, I'll grab my bag and you can think about where you would like to eat."

Tessa: Did this fool just wink at me? I can't really think that nothing will happen between us, I am not that naïve. I want to literally eat this man and if we do a supper, or dinner, or take-out - whatever - I can't guarantee that he won't become my meal.

Theo: "Are you ready?" She is so jumpy and flushed tonight, I can't hide my smile. I am stoked.

Tessa: "No, can you come in here for a minute, please?"

Theo's POV:

It has been two months and some odd days since I started working here at *Secret Games and Co.*; I am a twenty-six-year-old Intern Illustrator and my boss is a bombshell, I mean right out sexy and curvy as fuck. On my first day she wore a burgundy knee length, short-sleeved dress that shaped her arse and fit her like a glove, damn! She had these matching heels on, and all day, all I could think of was taking her on her desk with nothing but those damn shoes on. When I introduced myself, she gave me this look, and I could see that she was fierce and feisty and that's just how I like my women. She is young and well accomplished so I know she won't be easy, but I will dig deep to have this woman. She composed

herself and asked or rather instructed that I start with the bookshelf, but I could feel her eyes on me all day.

On various occasions I have overheard her talking to her loser fiancé; she is worth so much more, and if Tessa were mine, she would never even have to worry about communicating with me. I'd call her every damn day to make sure vultures like me didn't attack while I was away. That first day, I offered to stay late and help her move boxes. I know I looked over-eager and the other interns didn't let me forget it, but it was well-spent overtime, just watching her.

Today, two months later, it is a Friday, and on Fridays Tessa pushes us to complete everything we had dangling because she believes that on Mondays, we start fresh. She is a wonderful boss, very hard working and very intimidating, but one day about two weeks ago I could see her watching me in one of our board meetings and I wanted to impress her, so I took initiative and asked if I could try and get the specific blue she wanted the Dragon to be. The Art Director and his team had really tried but she just wasn't happy with their shade, so I tried, and she actually approved my attempt, and we kept the colour. I was so proud of myself too. I love the looks we exchange in meetings and when we pass each other in the corridor.

We submitted the final game today and everyone has gone home. I stay late yet again but the tension between Tessa and me is so high that I can't stand not touching her for one more minute. I need an excuse to go to her office, but I can't think of one. Only Mike, who has become a good buddy of mine, knows how I feel about Tessa. She has been so sad lately and is always working. I really just want to make this woman happy. We are sitting in his office, and he says he needs to leave now, so I ask him for an idea, and he just shrugs his shoulders and laughs at me. I am walking with him to the elevator with all the files in my hands, when we get to it, he scares the hell out of me by hitting the files out of my hands, then laughs and says, "Thank me later." It doesn't take me long to realise he actually helped me; I know she must have heard the files falling so I pick them up and go to check on her. I see the stapler in her hand, and I want to laugh.

Tessa: "What are you still doing here?"

Theo: "I am so sorry, Tessa, I accidently dropped some files. Are you okay?" I am standing in her doorway with my hands in my pockets.

Tessa: "No, dammit. I nearly had a heart attack, I thought everyone had left."

Theo: "No, Mike and I were editing some touch-ups to the new project. He just left. I was putting away the files and getting ready to leave too." I feel like I owe her an explanation.

Tessa: "Oh, okay good. Don't you have a girlfriend or a family or a mum, or something?"

Theo: Oh, so she wants to know if I'm available. I start walking towards her, let's see how far I can push her. Women think we don't know this old trick, asking me if there isn't someone at home worried about me, when she just wants to know if there isn't anyone, period. "I am happily single, and I don't live with my mum." I stop right in front of her, and she looks up at me.

Tessa: "Okay, I am also getting ready to leave."

Theo: When she closes her eyes, that's my confirmation, I do affect her. "I'm starving, would you like to grab something to eat before we head home?"

Tessa: "Yes."

Theo: I am really trying not to laugh at her, but she did answer really quickly. I don't want to get too cocky, maybe she is really just hungry. "Cool, I'll grab my bag and you can think about where you would like to eat so long." I wink at her and walk out of her office. I adjust my pants because I won't lie, being that close to her affected me too. I grab my things and go back to her office. "Are you ready?" She is so jumpy and flushed tonight, I can't hide my smile. I am excited, finally I can take her somewhere private, just us.

Tessa: "No, can you come in here for a minute please?"

Theo: Oh fuck, can a woman not just enjoy some company? I sit down and I know she is going to give me the 'I am your boss' speech. I use the opportunity to close her office door, not that it's necessary, no one is here but us.

Tessa: "Look, Theo, I am your boss… "

Theo: I stand up, walk around to where she is standing, and she suddenly goes quiet. She steps back but the desk is blocking her and unless she stops me, I am going to see where this will go.

"You may be my boss during the day, but it is well after our working hours."

I stand right up against her and wait for her to stop me, say something, or give me a signal that she's uncomfortable. I put one hand on her hip and lean in to kiss her, and she closes her eyes.

Tessa's POV:

Theo walks towards me and puts his hand on me and my mouth drops open. Lord knows I have to stop him, but I can't, I don't want to. I want him to kiss me.

Theo: "Turn around."

Tessa: I am like an obedient little schoolgirl, and I like it. He unzips my dress and tells me to face him again, I glance up at him and come face to face with his wicked grin. I can't take my eyes off him, then the little devil inside me takes over. I part my lips to accommodate my breathing, bite my bottom lip, and reach forward and place one of my hands behind him to pull him closer to me. This time his breath hitches in his throat and he slides my dress off my shoulders. I am standing there in my bra and panties and my heels. He smiles.

Theo: "I have been picturing you like this since the first day I laid my eyes on you, and I am so glad you are wearing the same shoes."

Tessa: He remembers the shoes I wore the day we met? That's so sweet, I think to myself, as he lifts me up and places me on the table behind me. He leans in and starts to really kiss me, and I unbutton his shirt. I remove his shirt and he is standing in front of me bare-chested and in his pants. This is so sexy I want to scream. I get my first full glimpse of the divinely formed beast and I am lost again in his kiss. His tongue is exploring my mouth and he reaches a hand to either side

of my face, pulls away and he is staring into my eyes. He looks lost. "Be mine," he whispers. I frown, not understanding. "Please, Tessa, be mine," he says again, and before I can come to my full senses, he kisses me again, so passionately.

He unclips my bra and now the temperature in the office must be a hundred degrees. I'm breathless. He leans down and sucks on my nipples and I am just sitting on the desk watching this seductive scene. He kisses my stomach and dips his tongue in my navel, and oh my, is he going to…? Yes! I clutch my eyes closed tightly. He is kissing my inner thigh, and sucking and licking and kissing me, and my body is paying attention, I am wet. I groan. I put my hands in his hair and he is kissing me through my panties, and it is so exquisite. He comes up for air and he is a mess. He cups my chin, and he runs his free hand over my breast, and he kisses me again. I grab him by his belt, and I start to undo his trousers and he leans forward; we are almost on top of my desk. I lie down flat, and the table is so cold, but I don't care. He kisses and tenderly sucks on each nipple and my hips start to move. Holy shit, I want him. This is so erotic, and I am about to combust. He is in his drawers, and I am just in my panties, and we are lying on my desk, suddenly we hear a noise and a voice, and it takes a minute to process.

Security: "Miss Tessa, I am just checking in. Are you okay?"

CHAPTER 27

Tessa's POV:

Security: "Miss Tessa, I am just checking in. Are you okay?"

Tessa: I put my finger on my lips to indicate to Theo to just be quiet, and I take a deep breath, "Yes, thank you, I am fine." I remember the door is just closed, it isn't locked, and my heart rate is through the roof.

Security: "Okay, ma'am, I will be downstairs if you need me."

Tessa: "I won't be much longer, thank you."

Theo is lying on top of me, and the room temperature has dropped so low that I am cold and seriously embarrassed. He slowly gets off from me and helps me up. We get dressed in silence; this is so awkward.

Theo: "Tessa, everything is okay, I know you have a reputation to keep at the office. You are my boss, and I don't look at you differently because of what happened tonight. I think you are beautiful, and I respect you. You have nothing to worry about."

Tessa: "Thank you, Theo, I do appreciate your saying that."

This guy always says the right thing.

Theo: "Get dressed, we can go down together and I will walk you to your car."

Tessa: "Thank you, Theo."

I get home that night and I realise I am hungry and horny. I check on Troy and he is fast asleep. I take a shower and go to bed, I am exhausted.

The next few days pass and I can't bring myself to concentrate, I haven't done anything productive in days because all I can see when I am sitting at my desk is our naked bodies. I can smell his presence in my office - his aftershave, his sweat, his body on mine. I squeeze my thighs together. I have turned away the cleaning lady for the last week because I am scared, she will wipe off my desk and wipe away my memories. I am like a sick, horny teenager.

Theo's POV:

I have never hated a security guard the way I hate Tessa's. He ruined the whole moment. Ah well, there is always tomorrow and the next day and the next day. I am lying in my bed and looking at my ceiling, but I have this ridiculous grin on my face. Tessa surprised me today and she looks even more beautiful without her clothes on.

6 weeks later

It is December and the holidays fill the air, the weather is amazing, and it is work as usual for me. I am now a permanent employee, and Tessa and I haven't had a moment to ourselves. Our team has been working non-stop and everyone stays late, and we all leave together. I have just finished my presentation with my illustrations which Tessa wanted before I left today, and after giving it to her, I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. This roller-coaster month has finally come to an end. Mike comes and asks me for my opinion on his final design and I know Tessa is going to love it, so I give him the thumbs up and he does his submission as well. Finally, the day ends, tomorrow our holidays begin, and I need to speak to Tessa, but we are having our office party tonight. Everyone leaves including Tessa; we got the afternoon off to go home and freshen up. I wait until everyone is out of earshot and when I see her, I even forget what I wanted to say. She is wearing a simple white dress, and her hair is long and wavy, and it falls over her chest - she is mesmerising. She sees me and smiles sweetly, and her

eyes are sparkling like stars. I have become so soft and needy around her, and we have a good relationship.

Nothing physical has happened between us since the night the security guard interrupted us, but the chemistry has been so strong between us it feels like we have grown closer. As usual I was lost in my train of thought, and as we are all leaving the building, I hear her say, "Follow me home." I want to jump out of my skin, but I keep my cool and try to slow down because I was practically running to my car.

When we get to her place, she tells me to park my car inside the garage and I understand she doesn't want to be seen, or to have to explain who I am. The sneaking around makes this all so exciting. I walk inside and we go upstairs, and she removes her dress. We start kissing and undressing before we get to her bedroom, and sooner rather than later we are in bed and all over each other.

Tessa's POV:

My breathing is ragged and he moves his hands down to my waist and over my hips, and he touches me intimately between my legs. His fingers slip through my lacy underwear and slowly circle around me. "You're so wet. I want you NOW." He pushes his finger inside me, and I am screaming, and I want more. He pushes inside me harder and faster. Suddenly, he sits up and throws my panties on the floor. Pulling off his boxers, he reaches over and grabs a condom - everything is happening so fast. Then he moves between my legs, spreading them further apart. He leans down, his hands on either side of my head, and he blows into me, no warning, no hesitation.

The sexual tension between us has been far too astronomical, going on for far too long. The feeling is wonderful, and we just couldn't wait and there definitely wasn't any time to slow down or have foreplay. He eases back with exquisite slowness and then he starts to move, and we have raw, harsh sex. We both climax and we are screaming and moaning, and everything is out of control; we are trying to slow our breathing. My heart feels like it's thumping out of my chest, and my

thoughts are in an uncontrolled panic. *Wow… that was astounding.* "Tessa are you okay?" he asks, and I stretch out and I feel happy and relaxed. I smile and say, "Yes, I am fine, let's shower and then you can leave to get ready for tonight." He acts wounded that I've kicked him out, but we can't both not show up to our Christmas party. That would just be weird and so obvious.

"We might need to do that again," he says, and it takes my breath away. He leans down and kisses me very gently at the corner of my mouth and then he says, "Lie on your front." I turn over and he runs his hand down my back to my behind. "You really have the softest skin," he whispers in my ear. "Do you want me again?" He pushes my hair aside and begins to kiss me around my ear and down my neck, and his hand travels up my thigh to my behind. He caresses my cheeks slowly, and then trails his fingers down my spine and between my legs. I am helpless and ready. I smile. "From this point on, Tessa, you are mine," he says. "I don't want to share you." His voice is powerful, his words are seductive. I am now on my knees and my behind is in the air; this is intimate, and I feel so exposed. He is sitting behind me and gently he starts to massage my clitoris, circling slowly. I have never been touched like this before. He is stroking my vagina and I am pushing my head into the pillow because I can't contain my excitement anymore, this is extraordinary. "You're so ready," he says as he moves suddenly, reaching for another condom. I am lying there, waiting, the anticipation is exhilarating. He leans down, his weight on me again, and he grabs my hair, holding my head so that I cannot move. Slowly he eases into me, slowly, slowly, until he's buried in me, and he deliberately circles his hips and pulls back, pushes in and out and in and out; he does this to me over and over. He is driving me insane – he is teasing, with the intentionally slow thrusts. "You feel so good," he says, and my insides start to tremble. I'm not sure I have the strength to keep my arse up. My body is boiling, I am hungry for a release. I am screaming again, and I won't be surprised if my neighbours can hear me. Oh Lord, I start to find my release and his breathing becomes more irregular. My insides start quickening; I come, and I am now pushing for him to go faster, I am calling out his name into the mattress, shoving my face down, and he freezes, finding his release. I never knew I could be this loud during sex.

Theo's POV:

We are at the Christmas party, and I am exhausted. What an evening. People are dancing and laughing, and the table is groaning with food, and I realise I am starving. My cellphone rings and it is so loud in here I go outside to take the call and it is my grandmother, who never calls me. She is crying and I am trying to hear what she is saying but she is just crying too much, so I drop the call and call my mum. While I am waiting for my mum to answer my call, I think of all the possible things that could be wrong.

My grandparents and my parents stay in Tofo, Mozambique. I moved here five years ago to start my own life and to get some space. My family is very close, and they can be very overbearing. My mum answers the call, pulling me from my thoughts, and I try quickly to tell her what happened and try to get information from her, but she is clueless. But luckily my mum doesn't stay too far away from my grandma so she says they will drive over there right now. I drop the call and call my grandmother and she answers. She is a little calmer now, but she is still crying. "Mommy Elsie, please, what's wrong?" I ask her, and her soft, delicate voice comes over the phone in response: "Son, Grandpa isn't breathing." I fall to my knees; I am in shock. I feel like I am losing oxygen and the place is spinning. I can't lose that man now. I try to regain my composure, still kneeling, and I take a deep breath and tell my grandmother that my parents are on their way. I think to myself, *Lord, please I am so far away, I hope my grandfather can hold on until my parents get there. My grandfather has been my rock, my everything, how will I cope without him?*

I tell my grandmother that I will stay on the phone with her until my parents get there. This cannot be happening. I realise that I need to get to London; I run to the front of the venue and get into a taxi and tell the driver to get me to the airport. I call my 'right hand', tell him to pack my things and send my details and passport to the private airline. You see, no one knows who I am; my family is one of the richest families in Tofo, Mozambique, and we are well protected, but I came to South Africa to get away from it all and start over. My family owns all the businesses in our small town, and I don't like it. I get to the airline, and everything is arranged, I am greeted by the pilot, escorted by security and we

take off. I am sad, I have left my new life behind, my friends, my job and, SHIT! TESSA…! I sit up in a panic, I didn't even get a chance to say goodbye. Tears roll down my face and I realise how much I am about to lose. What a day!

CHAPTER 28

Almost four months ago……

Amy: ***The next morning, I wake before him, I know this is the only way, so I slide out of bed, get rid of the condom, fix my hair, and get back into bed.***

He looks at me, very surprised, and then he asks me if we had sex. My spirit is immediately dampened. "Romeo, we didn't use a condom." He jumps out of bed and starts frantically looking for it. It is a good thing I hid the dirty condom in Derek's chest of drawers - he will never look in another man's underwear drawer.

Four months ago……

Mr Heslop's POV: (Amy's father)

Mr Heslop: "Rita, that young man is perfect for Amy, we need to fix things between them."

Mrs Heslop (Rita): "I know, George, but what would you suggest we do? He left, making it very clear that he was not going to marry our daughter, and she is in her bedroom, probably crying her eyes out."

George: Why don't we call his parents, and set up a meeting? Maybe they will agree with us."

Rita: "It's worth a try, should I call right now?"

George: "Yes, before Romeo gets home. We need to convince them that it's the right thing to do."

Rita: This feels extremely inappropriate, but I make the call anyway. I am waiting and waiting and it just rings. "Georgie, there is no answer."

George: "That's it, these people can't think they will do as they please, let their son take away my daughter's innocence and not pay for the damages. We are going over there right now! Get your coat, Sweetheart." I get the keys and tell Rita that I will start up the truck in the meantime so it can warm up the engine, and I will meet her outside, but when I reach our porch, I see Romeo's car.

Why is he still here? I walk to the car, but the driver's door is standing open, and he is nowhere to be seen. What is going on? Rita comes outside and I suddenly see his car keys lying on the floor along with his cellphone. Something isn't right, so I scream to Rita, "Sweetheart, call the police! Right now!"

Rita: "Georgie, what's the matter?"

George: "Get inside the house and do as I say! Right now, honey, run!" I am in a complete panic, and I move as fast as my legs can take me. I make sure not to touch anything and when I get back inside the house, I lock up and make sure to close the curtains; Rita is calling the cops and Amy comes running down the stairs. She looks scared too.

Amy: "Dad, what's wrong, why are you screaming?"

George: "Something has happened to Romeo; his car is out front with his keys and cellphone and he is nowhere to be seen."

Rita: "The police are on their way."

Amy: "I have to call his parents."

George: Amy runs upstairs and all we can do is wait. I get my gun just in case these suckers are still on my premises. Rita is making tea, she always does that when she is either angry, scared, or sad.

Amy comes down the stairs and tells us that Romeo's parents are on their way. The pregnancy can wait for now.

30 minutes later - Romeo's parents show up but the police are still not here. I open the door for them and invite them in. His dad says that he went to the car and the keys and cellphone are still lying there, so whoever took Romeo didn't come back. He also explains that his lawyer Jake is on his way, and then he apologises for missing our call. We all sit anxiously and wait. Eventually the police show up along with Jake.

The police question us for what feels like hours, and Romeo's mother is crying so much it breaks my heart. Their lawyer keeps hugging Amy and telling her everything is going to be okay, which is a little strange, but right now nothing is making sense. Mr Edward Kale is a rich man, so the police and Jake are trying to keep this quiet and away from the press, but the police are also saying we need all eyes and witnesses. This is a nightmare; Edward's cellphone rings and the whole room falls silent. The police tell him to put it on loudspeaker so that they can listen in.

Edward: "Hello?"
Kidnapper 1: "Mr Kale, we have your son."

Lisa cries even louder and the police and Edward walk away from her.

Edward: "What do you want?"
Kidnapper 2: "Money, justice, your life…..we're out to ruin you!"
Edward: "You can have anything, just tell me where to meet you."
Kidnapper 1: "It won't be that easy, Kale. We are going to play a little game."
Edward: "We don't have to drag this out, I have what you want, I have money and you can have my life in the place of my son's life - just let him go."
Kidnapper 2: "What about justice, Mr Kale?"
Edward: "Justice for what?"
George: I am sitting at the edge of my seat; this is like a movie. In the meantime, the police have set up devices and there is an

investigating officer telling Mr Kale to ask as many questions as possible to keep them on the line so that the police can trace the call. Their lawyer Jake has been sitting with a laptop and I have no clue what will happen next. My wife is making tea for everyone, and I want to tell her to sit down. No one wants tea right now. My house is full of people and the neighbours have started gathering. This will never go down quietly.

Kidnapper 2: "All your sins, Mr Kale. You see, your life hasn't been a simple one, so the kidnapping of your son won't be simple either."

Edward: "Please, you can have anything, just tell me what to do?"

Kidnapper 1: "We'll be in touch."

George: There is a loud skin-to-skin bang, and I close my eyes as nobody anticipated the smack Lisa would give her husband. She screams that this is his fault and she will make sure that he pays for this once her son is safe.

Edward's POV:

Two weeks later:

It is the situation every parent fears — we have managed to keep this quiet with the help of the Heslop's, because they could have run to the newspapers, but they haven't yet. We had to pay them to keep quiet and I can't believe they used this awful experience to extort money from us, they already have so much money of their own. But I don't care, I just want Romeo back home. We have all been on lockdown, no one has left the yard in the last two weeks, and of course no one is speaking to me. Lisa has moved out of our room, Miles and Dillan give me dirty looks, and I feel uncomfortable. I feel like a failure, and what's worse, we haven't heard from the kidnappers again. Jake has basically moved in with us, he goes between our house and the police station, and I can't take this any longer.

Amy's POV:

It has been two weeks since Romeo's disappearance and I feel horrible. My parents are starting to question why my belly isn't showing yet, why I don't want to go see a doctor, and on top of all that, Derek - Romeo's best friend - found the condom and said he would tell on me. He called the night we found out Romeo was kidnapped, and in the heat of the moment I said, "So what if I faked my pregnancy? Nobody cares." At that point, I didn't really care. I was scared for Romeo and hurt for his mother, but now he knows the truth and I need to plan or figure something out and quickly. The last time Romeo and I had sex I remember feeling so insulted and unwanted and I just wanted the shit between us to end. Then I think about the night Romeo came home and told my parents I was pregnant; I hear his voice clearly: "You have always known how much I have loved Lilly. Yes, I was never ready to be with her, but I am now. Things are finally okay between Lilly and me and I won't let this mess things up between us. I am sorry, Amy, don't be mad. I have to go now. I will fetch you tomorrow, we can talk, and we can go see a doctor, okay?" I wonder if Lilly even knows something happened to him. I hope the bitch doesn't, I hate her.

Derek's POV:

I left home for two weeks for a small job that my dad needed my help with. We packed a few things and hit the road, and when I came back, my room had an awful smell. The next day I cleaned, threw out everything and even decided to repaint.

No one was home during the two weeks we were gone for work, and the rest of the house was fine, but my room had an 'off' smell. I never expected to find what I found. I am sitting on my bed, after puking and gagging like a little girl, and I am trying to figure out a couple of things: 1) Why would I put a used condom in my drawer? And 2) Could it be someone else's?

I vomit again, the thought of it being someone else's…. shit! Romeo and Amy were in my room that night. Arsehole! I will kick his arse when I find him, this is a sick joke. I call him and when he answers my call, he denies everything and

tells me they didn't use a condom because he was smashed. He hangs up on me because he said he was dealing with Amy at the moment, and we would catch up. It took me a few hours but after sanitising myself and my room for an hour, I put two and two together. If Romeo says they didn't use a condom but doesn't deny they had sex in my room that night, then it must have been Amy trying to pull a fast one on my homie. Fuck that! I download the phone call recorder app and I call her; the little tramp will learn not to mess with my friend.

Jake's POV:

Amy has been calling me every day for the last two weeks. At first, she was very concerned about Romeo and wanted an update every hour. Mr Kale said I could keep the Heslops up to date because he didn't want them running to the media with this as they were extorting money from him, which I think is very low, but I know this was all Amy's father's doing. She has nothing to do with it, he is a greedy man. She is sweet and drop dead gorgeous. Our phone calls were brief but over the last three days we have had longer conversations. She first asked me how I was doing - I mean, no one has ever done that. It was sweet, you know. Something unexpected but really great, and then it happened, we fell in love.

I've been at this job for a total of around two years. My bosses love me, I'm repeatedly told how my work is excellent and I'm a great employee and a great lawyer, so this is out of character and very unprofessional, but when I saw her for the first time, I thought what any guy would. "Daaaamn. That girl is FINE!"

It started with a little small talk, and I should add that when she was crying over Romeo, she kept leaning into my arms and I had to hug her, I couldn't just stand there, that would have been rude. Then she took off her glasses and got me hook, line, and sinker. I'm a sucker for gorgeous eyes and a nice smile. She has both. Our conversations went from, 'Any news?' to everything I now know about her. She's from the same town as I am, recently graduated college (which by my estimate would make her a few years younger than me), she has a really nice personality, is fun to talk to, and definitely beautiful. After all the late-night secret phone calls and chatting, our last conversation got me really anxious.

LISA'S POV:

I don't know if I will ever forgive Edward. This time his sins and his lifestyle have gone just too far. Things have been so perfect between us lately, but his past will always come back to haunt us… FUUCCKKK! I hear my husband screaming and I start running. I am praying to God that this isn't about Romeo, but I am in a complete panic! "God, please don't let them hurt my son, God, please, let Romeo be okay!" I am crying frantically already, and when I get to his office, he says, "Jake and Amy ran away together, he just resigned."

CHAPTER 29

Josh: *I reach the door and something on the floor catches my eye, is that a… wait… it can't be - is that a pregnancy test?*

I walk in a little further and I see her. She swings to face me and the look on her face confirms my worst suspicions.

I sit on the sofa, and she tries to explain - what and why and when - and I just don't care, she betrayed me. An overwhelming feeling of sadness washes over me and I am choked with emotions I have never felt before. Doesn't she know how much I love her? Why would she do this? I put my head down and the tears are flowing, and when I can't take it anymore, I get up and walk out. I always knew that she and Romeo had a strong bond, a weird relationship where she loved him and he hurt her and he loved her, and she could never work past his past, but I never expected this. I never expected her to sleep with him, and now she is pregnant. I get to my car, and I am driving, driving, and hitting my steering wheel and screaming and crying. I am a madman, angry and hurt. I look up and find myself at Romeo's house – yes, Romeo's house. How I got there I don't know, and I don't care, he has to pay. No one walks over me and just gets away with it.

There is a little boy at the gate, and I ask him to call Romeo for me. I know security is tight and they have big gates and high walls. He looks up and says, "Romeo is gone, the police say Uncle Wes must give money and then they can fetch him, but my daddy and Uncle Wes doesn't know where to fetch him from." Then he picks up his ball and skips off. WHAT DOES THAT MEAN????

I run back to my car and drive to the nearest café. I grab my laptop and I start searching for news on Romeo - a kidnapping of a rich boy, man gets lost or something - but there is not a trace of him on the news. I type *Kale son missing* or *Kales' son kidnapped*, and I try every possible headline, but nothing. I slam the laptop closed. The kid is a little boy, what does he know?

I drive home and when I get there, I fall in Granny Ola's arms and just hold her because I don't know what else to do.

Ola: "What's wrong, my son?"
Josh: "I think I just lost Lilly, Abuela."
Ola: "Why would you say that?"
Josh: "I think she chose another man over me."
Ola: "Have you asked her?"
Josh: "I didn't have too. She is pregnant and the baby isn't mine, and what's worse is that he is missing. He left her, and his family doesn't know where he is."
Ola: "Josh, sit up, look at me."

I sit up and listen to my granny.

Ola: "Do you love her?"
Josh: "Yes, but..."
Ola: "Yes or no, Josh!"
Josh: "Yes, Abuela, I do?"
Ola: "Do you want to be with her?"
Josh: "Yes."
Ola: "Does she love you?"
Josh: "Yes."
Ola: "Let me tell you something. Listen to me. A father's relationship with his child is a precious and unique one. A bond not easily broken. I have raised you as my son and no one can take that away from me, Josh; I am not your mother but that doesn't mean you are not my son. When the time comes, the DNA won't matter - you would have decided that even if you are not

the father, he or she will be your child. Right now, Lilly needs you, be there for her. Bigger decisions and conversations can be had later."

Josh: My grandmother is right; I love Lilly and I won't lose her to Romeo. I need to speak to her, and if she chooses me, I will support her, and we will make this work. "Thank you, Abuela, I need to speak to Lilly, I'll be home soon, okay?"

A few weeks later

LILLY'S POV:

Romeo doesn't know I am pregnant, and I am almost sixteen weeks along. Josh and I are still together, and regardless of what has happened, I make it up to him every day. I am so grateful he has forgiven me. We are at my doctor's appointment, and we said we were going to tell my parents that I am pregnant this weekend. I am so afraid of my dad's reaction, but this isn't something I can hide forever. Josh asked me not to mention who the father is, no one needs to know. He is here and he is taking responsibility for my actions, so I am okay with his request. I have tried calling Romeo for weeks, but he never answers or returns my calls, so I am moving on with my life. I will make the best out of this situation. The doctor asks me to urinate into a cup and he does the necessary weight check and BP checks, and then I lie down for the scan. He asks if we would like to know the sex of the baby and I say no but Josh says yes. He looks at me with his brown puppy eyes and I give in.

Doctor: "Congratulations, you are expecting a girl."

We are so happy, and we both have tears in our eyes. This moment is perfect, but deep down I can't help thinking of Romeo. We drive home in complete bliss, and we talk baby names. Josh is funny because his suggestions are names similar to his - Josie, Joshlynn, Josetta - and I am laughing so hard I almost wet myself. Josh presents me with beautiful diamond earrings and says it's a baby gift - I love them. He leaves that evening, and we are both happy. I fall asleep immediately

because I am so tired, but I suddenly jolt awake. I feel weird, sore, and wet, and when I lift the covers all I see is blood.

I try to keep still as if that would stop the blood. I pull the covers back down and pray that I was dreaming, but when I check again it looks even worse, and now I start crying. I call Josh and he says he will be here in ten minutes, so I get up, clean myself up and get dressed. I tell myself to be strong, everything is going to be okay. We reach the hospital in record time and two hours later they confirm my worst fear: I had a miscarriage. I just lie there and cry. I don't want anyone around me, I don't want reasons or medical terms, I just don't care. I want to be alone. I think of Romeo, and I get angry. Where was he when I needed him? How could he let this happen? Maybe the stress of worrying about him all the time caused this? I am angry and it is his fault.

They give me strong pain killers, and just like that, they send me home. The drive home is quiet and long and when we get to my house, I ask Josh not to come in, I just want to be alone. I lie in my bed and cry like a baby, and I think of how many times I have fallen asleep like this, and that makes me cry even more.

A few hours later - it is late, past midnight - there is a knock on the door. I am still awake because frankly I just don't want to sleep anymore. My dad calls me, and it takes me a few minutes to really want to get up, it's cold and late and I am sore. I reach the top of the stairs and I see the cops at the door, and I want to run down, OH MY GOD…. WHAT NOW?

Officer: "Lilly?"
Lilly: "Yes, that's me, is everything okay?"
Officer: "Ma'am, do you know Josh Wittier?"
Lilly: "Yes, is he okay? Is it Granny Ola?"
Officer: "Miss, I am afraid he has been in a car accident."
Lilly: "Who? Josh? Is he hurt, did he break an arm, a leg? What happened? Where is he?"
Officer: "We found him about two hours ago and we have been trying to find his emergency contact, but we have had no luck. Do you know who we can call?"

Lilly: "I am his family, it's just me and Ola. Please, officer, is Josh okay?"

Officer: "I am afraid he didn't make it, ma'am"

I FALL TO MY KNEES.

I met Josh at a car accident, how apt. I was hurt and alone and he was there. He showed up, every time. Six feet tall and jet-black hair, Josh was definitely handsome, but it was his vanilla-mochaccino-fresh cream-caramel-looking skin that really attracted me. We instantly felt a connection. He was the only other serious boyfriend in my life. We dated for a long time, it felt like forever, and he always said I racked up his phone bill because I talked too much. I hated it when he called me his monkey. We had a code word, SHMILY (SEE HOW MUCH I LOVE YOU), which we scribbled on scraps of paper and hid in each other's cars so the other person would find them by surprise when we were apart. We planned to spend the rest of our lives together. I will be nineteen years old in a few months and he won't be here; it breaks my heart. I was happy to meet his Granny Ola who raised him; he called her Abuela, Spanish for grandmother. It felt like I was drowning in sorrow when the police told me they found Josh's car flipped over on the highway. My heart was pounding as I asked as many questions as I could: Did he break an arm? Was he okay? After five long minutes they told me he was gone. I screamed and collapsed on the floor, crying. Every part of me hurt tremendously. I couldn't get enough air into my lungs, my heart felt like it was going to explode.

Days before the funeral, I barely ate or slept. Friends tried to comfort me by saying, "It's going to be okay," but I wanted to snap, "How?" Lee, my best friend, knew I didn't want to talk. She just stayed quietly by my side, handing me tissues while I cried and cried. Granny Ola asked me to give a eulogy at the funeral, and I did, focusing on the happy moments we'd shared. But as I watched his casket being lowered into the ground at the cemetery, I lost it. Had it not been for my mom holding me back, I would have literally thrown myself into Josh's grave. I was consumed with pain.

Several months later, I take all my savings, pack a bag, and kiss my parents goodbye at the airport. I leave on a much-needed vacation. I need to get away from the place we shared all our memories. On the plane I watch as a mother scolds her little son and I want to yell at her for being so ungrateful. I have just lost my unborn daughter. I am furious at the unfairness of her death and Josh's death and how uncertain my future now seems. I spend the whole flight wondering if the accident would have happened if I had let Josh stay that night. I promised to visit his grave once a week; that was before Granny Ola told me that he would be buried in his hometown. I felt so alone. I asked her to engrave SHMILY on his tombstone and she promised she would. A week after the funeral, Granny Ola asked me to help her pack up her things and send them to Josh's aunt's house. She was moving so that she didn't have to be alone, and she obviously needed someone to look after her and take her to hospital check-ups and appointments. It was hard, I felt like I was losing her too, but I understood. We hugged and cried and bid our goodbyes.

I get to the hotel, and I begin bingeing on chips and cookies, and I think of his eyes that were so deep and dark. I spend the first week mourning my baby girl and my handsome boyfriend who I lost on the same day.

CHAPTER 30

LILLY'S POV:

After losing my baby and my boyfriend all in a matter of hours, my life seems lonely and incomplete. I have no idea who I am or what I want to do or achieve, my plans for my future seem uncertain. Several months later, my dad came to me one evening, and even though he didn't know about the baby, he could see how deep my pain ran. He sat me down and told me I needed a fresh perspective and some time to clear my head, so we decided on a holiday. I got my savings ready, my passport and packed a bag. My dad paid for my hotel and my flight, he said it was an early birthday gift for my nineteenth birthday and that made me smile for the first time in weeks. My dad believed that you had to work for every penny he ever gave you, so this was very generous of him. I usually loved my birthday but this year I wasn't sure how it would work out.

Two days later I am at my hotel, crying, eating, and sleeping; I finally get much-needed rest. On the Friday morning I wake up feeling much better, refreshed, and somehow the pain in my heart has eased up, even if just a little. I don't think I will ever fully recover. I shower and put on my sexy, colour block white and red halter bandage bikini set with a matching hat. I throw over my white Calypso boho sundress and pack a bag with a towel, sunscreen, and a book. I am ready for the beach. I don't want to see my hotel room today. For the first time since I arrived in Rio De Janeiro, I go downstairs for breakfast. I am staying in a Belmond Hotel; it dates to 1923 and it is beautiful and extremely large. I am excited and hungry.

The hotel is stark white with a big pool and almost one hundred pool loungers around the swimming pool. It is across the road from Copacabana Beach, 10 km from Santos Dumont Airport and 13 km from the iconic Christ the Redeemer statue. I figured my dad would book me somewhere close to a Christian amenity. I love the furniture and the original artwork that hangs so perfectly on the walls. The rooms are elegant and there are all sorts of tech stuff, TVs, iPod docks, wi-fi, and I can see the beach from my window. My room even has a mini bar. I have access to the large swimming pool, and I have my own butler and room service, which I abused in the first week of my stay. I walk down to the Asian restaurant, and I see the piano bar, tennis court and a posh spa and indoor gym. I could live here.

I sit down in the restaurant, and I order myself a cup of coffee and the breakfast named after the hotel. I like food and trying new dishes, so I sit and wait patiently. Someone flapping a newspaper catches my eye, he is wearing white linen trousers - very bold, I must say - and a white shirt with sandals, very beach-like attire but he is dressed like Jesus. The thought makes me smile. I can't see his face, but my food arrives, and I am served four plates! Four!

Dish One on the menu is fruit: simple, *manageable,* I think to myself. I get three slices of mango, two slices of grapefruit, pineapple and something that looks like a beetroot. I look at the 'beetroot' and decide I am not eating that. Dish Two is heavier: there is scrambled egg, fried tomato, a slice of toast and a pink sausage. Dish Three is a cheese croissant, a muffin and a bagel, and the last dish is what I really want to eat: waffles and ice cream. I opt for Dish One and Dish Four. Again, the newspaper moves, this time it moves up as if he was watching me and then covered his face again. The newspaper is shaking so I know he is laughing; I hope he is reading something funny.

I enjoy my meal so much - the food is delicious - I even end up eating the bagel. I get up to leave; I take my bag and walk towards the beach which is only a street away. The diversity of this place is amazing, there are random water features, grassy lawns, and then the beautiful white sandy beach. People say *Bom dia* and *Boa tarde,* these are greetings that I learned this morning from the doorman - so far, the only person I've met who can speak English. I find a pool lounger and it

is perfectly placed underneath a small umbrella with a table, and it is close to the water, but there is a man in uniform standing there.

Lilly: "Good morning, do you speak English?"

Uniformed man: "Yes, Madam, what can I do for you?"

Lilly: *Oh, he has a sexy accent*…. "My name is Lilly and I want to know why are you standing here? Can I sit down or is this setting reserved?"

Uniformed man: "Yes, Madam, it is reserved for you. I am a waitron, I bring food, I bring drinks. You want food?"

Lilly: I think *Oh, thank God this just for me*, but I say, "I am so full, so no thank you, I just want to relax on the chair all day."

Uniformed man: "Of course, Madam, sit, sit!"

Lilly: "Thank you. What is your name?"

Uniformed man: "Me, I am Bernardo."

Lilly: "Nice to meet you, Bernardo. Like I said, I am Lilly." I sit down, and he leaves me alone…..amaaaaazzzzzing!

I take off my dress, take my towel out of my bag along with the sunscreen and my book, and I make myself comfortable. I rub on some sunscreen and I put on my sunglasses, and Bernardo comes back with a local cocktail called a *caipirinha* - yay! Bernardo is my new favourite human. The cocktail is really fresh, and I can taste the lime, but all too suddenly my bliss is stolen: I see another Bernardo-looking man bring a small table and chair and set it up next to me. No! I really don't feel like having a beach neighbour.

Lilly: "Bernardo, can you please ask your friend to move away as far as he possibly can? Please?"

Bernardo: "I can try, Madam, but there is a limited space on the beach for the upper-class seating, so if someone with money or power is approaching, there is not much we can do."

Lilly: "Bernardo, please call me Lilly. 'Madam' makes me feel old and I am not someone with power and money, and don't you have a nickname?"

Bernardo laughs really loudly and says that this has all been requested by my father and included in my stay. The set-up on the beach was done the minute I booked into the hotel and Bernardo has been assigned to me. He also tells me that he has been waiting for me since last week, and now I feel bad. He tells me all the rules and I laugh every now and then, not at him but because he is funny, although he really tries not to be. The rules were - if I can remember all of them - *Don't throw your everythings and anythings everywhere*, which I assume means don't litter; *Don't take the corals or starfish home, they live in the water not with you, Madam* (that makes me giggle); *When playing with the ball on the beach, please play safely and try not to get hurt*; and *Take care of your toilet business in the toilet facility;* which was obvious to me, but Bernardo made a funny face so I was giggling again.

A few minutes later, Jesus sits down a few feet away from me. Not *Jesus* Jesus, but the guy from the restaurant who was dressed like him. Bernardo was standing in my way when he sat down and now, he is facing his back to me. Bernardo sees me watching him, so he starts explaining.

Bernardo: "Madam Lilly, that man's…"

Lilly: "Madam Lilly? You just made it worse. Call me Lilly."

Bernardo: "Lilly, that man's name is Sergio Verissimo. His name means servant, but he really is the opposite. He is one of the richest men in Rio, and he owns the hotel you are staying in. Legend has it his worth is estimated at one hundred billion *Reals;* that's almost thirty billion dollars in America.

Lilly: My mouth must be hanging open because he doesn't look that old, how did he get rich that quickly? "Does he always come to the beach?"

Bernardo: "N*o*, Mada.. I mean Lilly, we rarely see him outside."

Lilly: I look around and I see five men in suits just standing there. "Are those his bodyguards?"

Bernardo: "Yes, I would assume so. Let me refill your *caipirinha.*"

Lilly: I didn't even realise it was finished; I was so intrigued by this story. Suddenly Sergio stands up and I thank God I have my sunglasses on, I almost melt in the sun, he is like a supermodel.

He takes off his shirt and then he looks right at me. I don't really care right now because I am looking at him too. He is tall, lean yet muscular, and broad-shouldered, with dark hair and intense, bright brown eyes. I take my book from the side table and Bernardo is back with my drink, and I try to ignore Sergio. He sits down but at the edge of his seat and I lift my book to cover my face. I think I doze off, but it is suddenly cold, and when I open my eyes, the sun is setting. My goodness, did I sleep all day? I am starving and cold and Bernardo is not around, so I pack up my things, get dressed, and walk back to the hotel. As I reach the doors, I am handed an invitation by Pedro, the doorman. He says the restaurant is having a supper for all the guests and everyone has been asked to dress in white. I almost run upstairs because what will I wear? I am excited and I when I get to my room, it has been cleaned and there is a fresh smell to the place. I take a nice long bath. I still have two hours before supper and I blow-dry my hair and style it into a simple look. I check my bag and I find my white wrap dress; it is tight and short and has a sexy slit. It is simple and elegant.

I come downstairs and there are not as many people as I thought, mostly couples. I look around and I don't see the beach guy, but I see a group of girls and they are already wasted. Makes me smile because it looks like they are having a great time. Shortly Bernardo shows up and shows me to my seat. I sit down and order the risotto and a glass of red wine. I enjoy the music and the atmosphere is wonderful, and even though I am alone in this foreign place, I feel at home and at peace. My meal arrives and there is a live band playing, this is one of the best nights of my life. The food is warm and the wine, oh my gosh, the wine is like silk. Soon I am done eating and the band is on their fourth song, and I am having my fourth glass of wine, gotta keep up. I am singing along, and all the words are wrong because I think they are singing in Spanish and I am just making things up as I go along. I order another glass of wine and Bernardo says no! I almost slap him, I am on vacation, what does he mean 'no'? Bernardo sees I am offended, and he says that the band is going to pack up now and if I go to my room, he will send me a bottle of red wine. "A whole bottle? Promise?" He smiles and promises, and

I go to my room because I am a lady of my word. I get changed and put on my pjs and soon I am asleep, I think I heard Bernardo knock and mention wine, but I was too drunk and too tired to care.

The next day I decide that I am going to get breakfast and hike up the mountain to visit the Christ the Redeemer statue. I get dressed, hop downstairs and grab a bagel and a coffee from the restaurant and leave the hotel. I get a cab and head to the mountain. Christ the Redeemer is an Art Deco statue of Jesus Christ in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. It was constructed between 1922 and 1931, at the top of Corcovado Mountain. It is beautiful and overlooks the city. A symbol of Christianity across the world. What a sight, and the view from the top of the mountain is amazing.

I head to the beach again, hopefully I'll get a swim in this time, and I see Sergio sitting in his usual place. I take off my shorts and vest and head towards the water. I sneak a peek when I pass his chair, but he is wearing sunglasses, so I look away and go for a swim. This is the best holiday I have ever had, and I am still here for three whole weeks.

CHAPTER 31

What happened to Romeo the night he disappeared?

> *I say good night and leave their home. They must really be crazy if they think I am going to get married because my parents say so,* I laugh to myself. *I walk to the gate, and before I get into my car, my cellphone rings. I reach for it but everything goes dark, like pitch black, and I feel a sharp blow. Someone puts a bag over my head, and I am knocked out.*

Romeo's POV:

I wake up and I have a throbbing headache; shit, it hurts. It's still dark and the black bag is still over my head but now my hands are tied. I have always known about kidnappings, our parents drilled this into our heads because of their financial status. I never thought this would happen and I didn't expect it now. I am an adult, for Christ's sake. As a child you have vivid dreams about being kidnapped and some anxiety, but as an adult, I am just really annoyed.

My name is Romeo Kale, I am twenty-four years old, and I am a qualified lawyer. I wake up every day at 6am and have cereal as my breakfast, something quick and simple because I don't want the maid to be making me breakfast so early anymore; she is older now and I respect her time a lot more than I did when I was a kid. I go to work, and I normally have a full day with many clients, and divorce cases are the worst. I leave work around 5pm and head straight to gym, where I

work out for two hours. I shower, go home, eat, watch a series or go out, typical young man routine, and then I get up the next day and do it all over again.

I hear a woman's voice as she whispers, "What are we going to do with him?" and then I hear a male voice and he says, "We just want his father to pay." I knew it, I knew this was about my father. I hear a second male voice say, "We're here," and the car suddenly stops. I hear the car doors and then everything is awfully quiet. It is getting cold, I can feel the chill in the air, which means it is late at night. I get pulled from the car and because my arms are tied behind my back and I am blindfolded, it feels like I am on a roller coaster and not in control of what is happening to me. The woman is screaming as I feel a blow to my ribs and face, and I taste blood. Someone pulls off my blindfold and it takes my eyes a minute to descend back into focus. I see a tall, really ugly dude and the other man and woman who are well dressed, and they look decent. This is a match from hell.

Scarface: "Where were you the day Jessica was killed?"

Romeo: "With your mother." He kicks me again and I cough up some blood.

Mrs Smith: "Scar, he was a fourteen-year-old child, his father killed Jessica, not him."

Scarface: "You paid me to take him, here he is, where is my money?"

Mr Smith: "in the trunk. Take it and you can leave."

Scarface: "You can thank your lucky stars I didn't kill you."

Romeo: "You can thank your lucky stars my hands are tied."

Mr Smith: "Smart mouth you have on you there, son, you better watch it."

Mrs Smith: "We said we wouldn't hurt you, but you need to be quiet."

Romeo: "You wouldn't hurt me? So, what is all this blood, a vampire festival?"

Scarface: "Take my advice, Wayne, and shoot this kid, he will run his mouth."

Mr Smith: "Romeo, you are going to call your dad and tell him we want five million rand, and once he pays the money, we will let you go and we will disappear."

Romeo: "Aren't you guys like actors or something? Are you broke?"

Mr Smith: "We're not doing this for the money, but your dad has to pay, and we aren't murderers, so we won't kill you like he killed our daughter."

Romeo: "My father didn't kill your daughter; your daughter was in a car accident."

Mr Smith: "Did you know your father was sleeping with our daughter?"

Romeo: I didn't actually know that, but I don't answer them.

Mrs Smith: "Your father was cheating on your mum, with a twenty-five-year-old - our daughter."

Romeo: "So why didn't you kidnap *him*?"

Scarface kicks me again and then he takes his bags of money and gets into the car and leaves. I only see the abandoned warehouse now and they drag me into it. I am so hungry. I look at the elderly lady, and ask her for something to eat, maybe she will have some mercy. "Hey, Sexy, got some food?" She just looks at me and then Mr Smith pushes me onto a chair. A few minutes later, Mrs Smith comes back with some kiddie meals; she feeds me star-shaped nuggets and some fries. I am starving, so I eat it. She wipes some of the blood and I look at her in her eyes and I can see her sadness, so I do what I never expected to do, and she probably didn't expect it either, but I apologise. "Mrs Smith, I am sorry for what happened to Jessica, she didn't deserve to die." She thanks me and I am so tired, I am exhausted, and I ask her to tell me where I am? "Am I still in the same country?" She assures me that I am and all they are asking is for me to make a video so they could send it to my father.

Mrs Smith: "All we ask from you Romeo is to make a video, so that we could send it to your father. Once we get the money, we will let you go."

Romeo: "Mrs Smith, I have the money, I can give it to you tonight and no one ever has to know about this."

Mrs Smith: "That isn't really the point, son, we need your father to make this right."

Romeo: "I understand. Where is the camera?" I give in because these people are just hurt and angry and want some sort of justice. They are only asking for five million rand, which is nothing

compared to losing a child, or rather that's what I think. I have never lost a child, so how would I know?

I don't have good communication with my family; they try but I am at fault, I keep my distance and try to just do what's right and live by their rules. Don't get me wrong, I love my parents and my siblings but if I make it out of this alive, I need to make some changes to my lifestyle.

Mr Smith wakes me and says they are ready, there are lights and a camera, and it is all really well set up; they are actors after all. I look up and my face is black, blue, and purple and there is still some blood. My hands are tied, and I am sore and tired, but I try to do this for the Smiths.

"Dad,

As you can see, I am alive. The people who took me want money, your money. They need you to deliver the money, alone, no cops! Follow their instructions and they won't hurt me. Here are the details.

Five Million Rand need to be delivered to 14 Mel 562 Rose Avenue at 3am tomorrow. Put the money inside a red duffle bag and put the bag into the trash-can. Once you've done that, walk around the corner on Parkers Road and you will find me." I look up at Mr Smith and ask him if I could say one more thing and they nod, "Lilly, if you see this, I want you to know I never left you and I love you. I will explain everything when all of this is over. Dad, if you don't do this, a letter will be exposed, and they will kill me.

They end the video and before I pass out, either from the pain or just exhaustion, I think of Lilly, my family, and my baby that Amy is carrying. The next day I wake up and I am in a different location. It looks like a house. I sit up and my hands are still tied. I feel a little disorientated and I can't help but feel like I am really close to home. Mrs Smith comes into the room with coffee, juice, milk, cereal, and a banana. I devour everything. She hands me a change of clothes and tells me there is a shower and asks me to promise her that I won't hurt her if she unties me. How can I? she is the only one who has been nice to me, and I hope

that this ends today. They had been keeping me for two weeks in that stinky-arse, ugly, cold warehouse. I take a shower and it feels great, and when I'm done, I look at the time and we have an hour left. I am tied up again and escorted to a van and Mrs Smith hands me a letter before they close the doors.

Dear Edward

Love of my life, you are the first thing I think of when I wake up and I'm looking forward to a life where I will wake up next to you, not needing to imagine you, because you will be sleeping right there next to me. I want to spend the rest of my life sleeping next to you and I can't imagine it otherwise. I can't wait for you to leave Lisa; you promised you would.

You are the love of my life. You're the only person in the whole world who can lift my spirits when I'm sad by giving me a single hug that means the world to me. You're the only one that I think of 24/7 - when I wake up, when I go to sleep, and every second in between.

My Pudding, I am the happiest woman alive because I have you. There wouldn't be a 'me' without you or a 'you' without me. We were meant to watch the sunrise in the morning together for the rest of our lives.

We were meant to be there for each other, to fight for our love, and never stop fighting no matter what. I love you! Don't leave me. We will last forever. I know that you are much older than me and my dad is your friend, but we will make this work.

Love forever
Jessica

CHAPTER 32

Sergio's POV:

My father taught me six things about love, I have never forgotten them. He said there was ***the hook, the search, the courtship, making the plunge, reaffirmation, and lastly falling in love***. I was in my hotel coming down in the elevator when it stopped on floor 3. It was odd, but I got off anyway. What are three flights of stairs, right?

Wrong!

I stepped out of the elevator, and I turned right and that's when ***the hook*** happened to me. She came out of her room, locked the door, and I was floored, I stopped dead in my tracks and my security bumped into me. The hook is what grabs a man's attention, it makes him notice the woman and encourages him to dive deeper. Some men are attracted to a woman's laugh, work ethic, or whatever, but it comes down to what makes a man look, and I was staring. She wore a white dress, and her hair was long, and it looked like black silk, and I was mesmerised. I am a busy man, a powerful man, I don't have time for women, but I was hooked. I followed her down the staircase - keeping a good distance between us - and into the corridor, made sure to see her room number, and my security ended up confused and stumbled again, but I didn't care. I just wanted to know what brought this *boazuda* to my hotel. *Boazuda* means sexy woman and she fits the profile, perfectly.

She stops in the lobby, looking around as if seeing the hotel for the very first time. Wasn't she looking when she booked in? it gives me a chance to pass her and sit down with a newspaper and watch her, which leaves my security even more confused as I was on my way to a very important exchange.

She sits down opposite me, and she is reading the menu like it is interesting, and every now and then I take a peek. She orders her food and when it arrives, her eyes are as big as saucers. I think she is shocked. This makes me laugh, didn't she know what she was ordering? She almost catches me, but I lift the paper up again, hoping I wasn't caught staring.

An hour later she leaves. Damn, she ate for far too long, I am late. I ask the doorman Pedro to keep an eye on her, I want to know her every move. I rush to my meeting, and we make the deal. I like smooth transactions. Then I decided on Step Two, ***The search.*** Pedro tells me she is on the beach, and I ask him to get me set up with table and umbrella. I act as if this is my usual routine, but my security is on the beach with suits and I know I'm looking stupid. I think of ways to get her to notice me and I am completely out of sorts. Normally women come flocking to me. I call my hotel manager and ask her to organise a banquet for all the hotel guests and make sure everyone attends, and to send a bunch of red roses to Room 26. I just want to keep looking at her.:

I listen to her laughing and giggling with Bernardo, and I need to see him and get him to give me some information. He leaves to get her a drink and I send one of my men after him to tell him I want to see him in my office later. I decide to sit up and take my shirt off. This isn't a way of boasting, I just need an excuse to look at her. I don't know who the fuck placed my chair, but they will pay. For a second, we look right at each other, and I see a hint of a smile, but she picks up a book and starts reading.

Hours later I think she is asleep because she hasn't moved so I call Bernardo, and as we head back to the hotel, I walk right past her and I see she has a small scar on her knee and a blue belly ring. Why do girls like this shit? I assigned two of my men to watch her and make sure she is protected, and if she ever needs anything

they should make sure it happens, but discreetly. I don't want her to know and to make her uncomfortable.

Sergio: "Bernardo, what is her name and why is she here? Is she alone? Sit down. I want everything you have on her."

Bernardo: "Yes sir, her name is Madam Lilly, she is in Room 26, she came alone. Her father booked her accommodation, and he asked me to ensure she is safe and has everything she needs, no matter the cost. All her meals at the hotel are paid for. She checked in last week, and the matrons were saying last week that all she did was order room service, and they found her crying multiple times. She hasn't spoken to me or anyone else about it and she has three more weeks with us, Sir."

Sergio: "Thank you, Bernardo. I need you to make sure she gets the black card, everything she wants to use and do in my hotel is free. Tell her it is a 'Welcome to Rio' card we give all our guests who visit our country for the first time, or whatever, just make something up. I also want you to get closer to her, never leave her side, and report back to me. I have assigned two security details to her, she must be safe, and I want to know if she mentions a boyfriend, understood? That will be all, thank you." So, she comes from money - my hotel isn't cheap, and her father has accommodated her well.

Bernardo: **"**No problem, Sir, thank you."

I have never felt like this before; I have never been willing to share my world with anyone and I don't want to scare Lilly, she can never find out what I do or who I am. Three weeks is not a long time. I need to make a move but maybe tomorrow. Tonight, I just want to observe. I seat myself behind the reflective window from where I can see the hotel floor, but no one will be able to see me, and I wait and wait but no Lilly. I call my hotel manager and ask her, "I thought I said all guests must attend?" As soon as I finish my sentence, she comes down the stairs and I drop the call. She looks like she is looking for someone and Bernardo shows up and leads her to her seat. I imagine that she was looking for me and it makes me smile. She orders her meal and I watch her intently. I love the way she eats; she

has a real appetite for food, and I see she drinks as well as she eats - the red wine keeps coming and coming and I call Bernardo, "Get her to her room safely."

I take the next day off and I let my PA, hotel manager, my security and everyone else know that I am unavailable. I wake up early to make sure all the shipments are set to go and that no deals will go bad, and I head to the beach. A few hours later I see her, thank God she showed up. She takes off her clothing and walks right passed me, and her arse is like juicy papayas. *"BUNDA LEGAL*," I whisper, and she doesn't hear me. I watch her toss her arse from side to side until she reaches the water and then she swims for twenty minutes. Lilly does everything with such attitude and when she strolls past me again, her front view is even better than the back. She causes me to sit up and I take off my sunglasses. Fuck, I can't control myself any longer.

Sergio: "*Boa tarde, Senhorita."*
Lilly: "Hello, I'm sorry I don't speak, uhm, Portuguese or Spanish."
Sergio: "Fortunately, I speak English. May I join you?"
Lilly: "Sure, I guess."
Sergio: "Thank you, Senhorita."
Lilly: "Please call me Lilly."
Sergio: "I'm Sergio."

We sit down and my lounger is moved next to hers. She looks at me suspiciously and she asks one of my guys for Bernardo. I want to laugh because she thinks Bernardo can protect her from me. Not that I want to hurt her, I probably want to protect this woman more than anything else. This is where step three comes in, ***Courtship.*** I want to get to know her, and why she ran so far away from home? Why is she here alone? Why was she crying? I will kill whoever broke her heart. I want to know her dreams, hobbies and….

Lilly: "What do you do for a living?"
Sergio: She breaks my train of thought, and she is so direct, I like it. "I own the hotel." That's not a lie but it's not the whole truth either.

Lilly: "The owner of a hotel isn't worth thirty billion dollars. The owner of a hotel doesn't need this much security and I will respect your privacy if you are not comfortable telling me, but I will then ask you to leave me alone because I am in a foreign country, alone, and I can't spend time with someone who can't be transparent with me."

Sergio: "Lilly, would you like to have dinner with me tonight? Safely, at the hotel? She just looks at me, directly into my eyes, and that's it, step 4, the **Plunge.** Lilly's eyes are like glass, sharp and sparkling. She pierces my soul and I know I have feelings for this woman: lust, love, I don't know yet, but she is mesmerising. I know I am attracted to her; I have taken an interest in her but what's the next step? I need her to trust me. "Would you feel more comfortable if Bernardo joins us?" I smile and she laughs.

Lilly: "Yes, actually. Bernardo will need to accompany me, and I will join you for supper. He can sit at the bar or a table close by, but you will pay for his meal and his overtime. Do we have a deal?"

Sergio: "Yes, Senhorita, we have a deal." She is so caring. We spend the afternoon talking and getting to know each other and the conversation just flows. Every now and then she laughs out really loudly, and it makes me so happy. We walk back to the hotel; stroll is more like it because I don't think either of us wants the walk to end. When we reach the door, she greets Pedro and asks him how his daughter is feeling and he just says, "Much better today, Mademoiselle Lilly." She smiles and says, "That's good news." I didn't even know Pedro had a daughter. Everyone, by whom I mean my security, Pedro, all the other guests and the other staff, even Bernardo, is staring as we walk through the doors. No one expected to see me with a woman; my life is very private. I walk Lilly to her room, and we stand in the corridor like teenagers, "I guess I'll see you later?" I lick my lips as I say this, not because I mean to flirt but because I really want to kiss her, and she just smiles and nods yes and goes into her room. I walk away sulking because two hours is a long time.

Lilly's POV:

I go into my room and flop on the bed. This is crazy right? I am smiling so hard, my cheeks hurt. I mean, obviously this is just a fling, the man stays in Rio, for goodness' sake. Maybe the rest of my holiday won't be so lonely after all. It is still sunny when Pedro opens the Range Rover doors for me. I am wearing a beautiful flowy, orange sundress and we are both sitting at the back because Sergio has a driver, and I am so smitten I barely see the white Toyota Sequoia pull up in front of us and a man get out with a 9mm pistol. He is wearing a hoodie and a bandanna that covers his face. The man approaches the passenger side of the Range Rover, raises the pistol, and starts firing, but Sergio's driver has already jumped out and is running towards the man. Sergio pulls me out of the car, and I run in the opposite direction and across the street. I see Sergio taking out his gun and there are gunshots flying everywhere. People are running and screaming, and I am frozen against the wall. The first two shots came from behind and one of them hit the frame of the rear window of the car we have just climbed out of. I am screaming. The next seven shots go through the front passenger-side window, sprinkling the scene with tiny slivers of glass. Sergio sees me and starts running towards me, still shooting at different people, and bodies are dropping left, right and centre. His security is shooting and suddenly I hear Sergio shouting and he has been shot in the leg.

All I see is blood; he is lying there in the middle of the road and I don't know what comes over me, but I run towards him, help him up and we run into the hotel. For a brief moment, I see my dress has blood on it, and I am distracted, thinking I was shot. The driver of the Toyota sees his friend's lifeless body and speeds away. Within seconds there are sirens and a crowd and police officers push away the bystanders. Sergio and I go back into the hotel. I am panicked and confused. He speaks to one of his bodyguards and I catch the last thing he says, "Find them and kill them, I want to know who put Lilly in danger, I want to know who did this." Sergio never lets go of my hand and for now, that's great. I think to myself, *this man has bodyguards, I would rather be with him than alone right now.* We walk towards the elevator and once we step inside, I don't know what takes over me, but I push him against the elevator walls and launch myself at him, it must be the adrenaline. I pull away and he is just staring at me and he

whispers *step 5,* ***reaffirmation***, and he turns the wheels on me and kisses me with every inch of his tall, strong, and erotic physique. We go up to the 23rd floor and his place is amazing. He hasn't let go of my hand and I am confused as to why they would shoot at him, but I don't feel afraid or worried, I know I am not in danger. I don't know how; I just know I am safe. We go inside and he asks me if I would like to take a shower and wear one of his shirts, and I say yes because I don't want to be covered in blood any longer.

Lilly: "Sergio, what just happened?" There are still tears in my eyes and I am still very confused.

Sergio: "Lilly, after you shower, I will answer all your questions, I promise." We spend the night eating and watching Lilly's favourite TV show and it took me an hour to explain to her that I am in a dangerous business and to console her. We have some wine and then she drills me again and I give in and tell her I run a cartel. I half expected her to run but she just said OKAY and asked for complete honesty and transparency. I think I am so close to step 6; my father would kill me if he knew I fell in love within a space of two days, but when Lilly risked her life for me today and ran to save me, I knew. She is sitting in my white t-shirt, and she is so close to me it feels very intimate. She circles back and asks me how I got into drugs and guns, so I give in and tell her: "My mother took me with her wherever she went; I later learnt that I was her cover. Who would question a woman with a baby? My mother once dug up a cooler box containing a quarter of a million dollars of drug money from our back yard. Honestly, Lilly, I enjoy what I do I wouldn't trade it for anything. I make a lot of money and I have a nice house, this hotel, and a yacht. I go on fancy vacations, and I pretty much have everything I want and need, except for someone to share it with." She widens her eyes and I laugh out loud, "I am not proposing, all I am saying is you have two weeks and a few days left in Rio, spend them with me?"

CHAPTER 33

Sergio: "Lilly, I am not proposing, all I am saying is you have two weeks and a few days left in Rio, spend them with me?" She agrees, and I am so happy; I think she is the one for me.

Once Lilly has fallen asleep, I go to the balcony and make some calls - the cops, the press, and I call my right hand, Rafael. I ask him if he knows more or has any leads, and he says he found the cartel who made a move against us, and I know this is war. They are staking out their warehouse now and he confirms that I need to get out of the hotel immediately because they are coming for me, and for the first time in twelve years, I feel fear - not for me, but for Lilly. I grab a duffel bag, throw in some money and my gun, and I wake Lilly. She's even more beautiful when she's sleepy but I can't think about that right now. We run to the elevator, and I call Bernardo because he knows about my business, who I am and what I do, and I know Lilly feels safe around him. Once we're in the elevator she tells me she needs her stuff in the room. "I will send for it when we're safe. For now, please just trust me." We come downstairs and Bernardo is ready with the car and even I like him more now. She runs towards him and hugs him, and I am a little jealous, is that normal? When we get to my safe house, my guys are waiting and I feel better, this is where we will spend the next two weeks and where I know Lilly will be safe, with me.

LILLY'S POV:

I was so scared; I needed a sleeping tablet that night and maybe therapy. Everything happened so fast and so suddenly, I didn't have time to react with emotions. I wake up the next day and it is already midday; wow, I never sleep late. Strangely I feel fine and relaxed now and the anxiety has left my body. I wake up to different scenery and I can actually take it all in. This house is beautiful, it's all glass and has enormous windows, and is located right on the beach. The waves crash against the rocks, and I love the sound. Unexpectedly Bernardo appears, and this man is my peace. He brings me a cup of coffee and tells me Sergio is waiting for me to join him for breakfast. I decide to first call my parents; I don't tell them that I have left the hotel or about the shooting, I don't want them to worry, so I just make sure they know I am safe and having a good time.

The next week goes by, and we have been shopping and to the beach and it is as if last week didn't even happen. I am excited because I have time to relax and manage to get everyone back home gifts. My family will be grateful that I thought about them; I think Marsha is getting the most out of this trip - I bought her toys and gadgets, bags and shoes. Sergio and I are having lunch at some local café, and I feel off, strange, weird, I can't pinpoint the emotion. I look across the table at Sergio and he is so tall and handsome, and I love his eyes, but how am I comfortable with this bad boy? With this lifestyle? Sergio calls my name; he says he has said my name four times already and asks me what I was thinking. How can I respond, what do I say? I have this longing feeling, but I don't know what for? Have I just been here too long? Suddenly, the television blasts loudly and my heart sinks; I jump up and almost throw over the whole table.

> "*The disappearance of 24-year-old Romeo Kale has just been broadcast all the way from South Africa. The kidnapping has come to light today, Aug. 15, 2009, but it is now brought to our attention that he has been missing for three months. After 86 days, Romeo was set free from captivity and got help from his father who had to pay a ransom to his kidnappers. The amount has not been disclosed to us, but we are told we will know soon. Romeo had been held by two famous South African actors, a 68-year-old man named Wayne Smith and a 63-year-old*

woman known as his wife. They have not been found and are reported missing. This was said to be revenge for the death of their late daughter, Jessica Smith. Footage was released of when Romeo Kale was kidnapped and he had to ask his father for the ransom. Watch this heart-breaking video with us now, live for the first time.

"Dad,

As you can see, I am alive. The people who took me want money, your money. They need you to deliver the money, alone, no cops! Follow their instructions and they won't hurt me. Here are the details.

Five Million Rand needs to be delivered to 14 Mel 562 Rose Avenue at 3am tomorrow. Put the money inside a red duffle bag and put the bag into the trash-can. Once you've done that, walk around the corner on Parkers Road and you will find me. Lilly, if you see this, I want you to know I never left you and I love you. I will explain everything when all of this is over. Dad, if you don't do this, a letter will be exposed, and they will kill me."

Amy: *I'm Amy Sivertsen, and you're listening to Endless Thread.*

Billy: *The show featuring Romeo Kale and his kidnappers Mr and Mrs Smith is brought to you for the first time since his disappearance more than 86 days ago.*

Amy: *We're coming to you from WBUR, Boston's LMK station. We have no information regarding the letter that Romeo mentions in his plea to his father, but I must say, Billy, whoever this Lilly woman is, she must be special.*

Billy: *Yes, I'm sure everyone is glad he is alive and safe. Unfortunately, he is not unharmed, we have just been informed that he is in hospital with two broken ribs and some serious injuries. This must have been very traumatic for his family and friends. 86 days is a very long time.*

Amy: *And let's not forget Lilly. From the information that we have it was said that a 25-year-old woman named Jessica Smith died tragically in a car accident more than ten years ago, but her parents only surfaced now to take revenge. What we don't know is why Romeo Kale was kidnapped and why revenge was taken on the Kale family.*

Billy: *I think it could just be the money.*

Amy: *What makes you say that, Billy?*

Billy: *Well, Amy, Romeo Kale works for a well-established law firm and apparently, he has just acquired his own practice. His father is worth millions, and they are and have always been known as one of the richest families in South Africa.*

Amy: *Well, that is all for now, folks; I'm Amy Sivertsen, and you're listening to Endless Thread.*

LILLY'S POV

I wake up and I am back at Sergio's place. I have a headache from hell, and I see Bernardo. "Oh my gosh, Bernardo, what happened?"

Bernardo: "You passed out at the café, Lilly, after the news about that man, Romeo Kale. Do you know him?"
Lilly: "Wait, that really happened? I thought I was dreaming."
Sergio: "Yes, that really happened."

I get a fright when I hear Sergio's voice. He comes out of nowhere and Bernardo excuses himself and leaves us alone. Sergio has a dangerous tone when he is mad or jealous. He has a different attitude, and when he walks into a room, you feel his presence.

Lilly: "Sergio, I know you have so many questions, I can explain."

Sergio: "Yes, I didn't want to assume when that guy mentioned 'Lilly' on the Television that he was talking about you, but after you passed out, I put two and two together. Is he the reason you spent the first week crying in your hotel room?"

Lilly: "I'm sorry, Sergio, I need to leave."

Sergio: "Leave?"

Lilly: "Yes, I need to get home."

Sergio: "Why? Is he your husband, boyfriend?"

Lilly: "I can't really explain that right now, there's no time."

Sergio: "Lilly, you owe me that much, I have told you everything about myself. We had no secrets between us, or at least that's what I thought."

Lilly: He is right, he has been open with me from the beginning, so I lead him to the sofa and sit him down. "Sergio, before I left South Africa, I was pregnant with Romeo's baby, but he didn't know and I didn't tell him because there is another woman who is pregnant with his baby too, her name is Amy. I lost his baby; I had a miscarriage."

Sergio: "This doesn't sound like a good man, Senhorita. I am sorry you had to endure all of that alone."

Lilly: "I have known Romeo since I was nine years old, Sergio. I have loved him all my life and I thought he had left me, but he hadn't, he was kidnapped. When I found out I was pregnant, I couldn't get hold of Romeo and I was with someone else at the time, his name was Josh, but he died, and I lost the baby and that's why I ended up coming to Rio de Janeiro."

Sergio: "This is all so confusing; will I see you again? Can we have more time?"

Lilly: "I don't think so; my life is in South Africa, Sergio."

Sergio: "But I thought we had something special here."

Lilly: "I am sorry, Sergio; we did have a wonderful time, and it was amazing, but I need to leave."

Sergio: "Can I drive you to the airport please, Lilly?" She's leaving me and she was never even mine; how can I feel this way? I am so muddled.

Lilly: "That would be lovely, thank you."

I call Bernardo and ask him to help me get all my belongings and within an hour, my things are packed, and I am on my way to the airport. Sergio is holding my hand and he hasn't said a word since we left his house so I break the silence and say, "I know this shouldn't have been our last day, we had so much more to do and neither of us wanted it to end the way it has. Despite everything, Sergio, this has been the best holiday I've ever had, and I don't regret one day. The food was really good, the country is beautiful and the hotel, my gosh, you have a wonderful hotel. I am so glad I met you and that you made my time in Rio de Janeiro so memorable. We don't share a lifestyle, Sergio, but I will never forget you." He smiles and kisses my hand, and I am glad we aren't going our separate ways grimly.

We get to the airport and while they are loading my luggage into the private jet Sergio arranged for me, I give him a small box, "I know you have everything you have ever wanted and needed but I want you to have something to remember me by. Open it when you get home." I kiss his cheek and tell him to take care of himself and we bid our goodbyes. I walk over to Bernardo, and I hand him a gift as well; he hugs me and now I am crying. I have met amazing people and I have had good and horrible experiences here, but I will never forget this holiday. "Be safe, okay? And please give this gift to Pedro." I am so sad I can't say goodbye, but I hope my gifts are a gesture of how much I appreciate everything they did for me.

I am filled with emotion on the flight home - sad to be leaving this wonderful place, although it has been a roller coaster. I am anxious to get home and speak to Romeo; what will happen between us? Is he okay? What about Amy? Do I tell him about our baby? There are just so many unanswered questions. After many hours of flying, I land home safely. Dillan has texted me the name of the hospital that they moved Romeo to, and I take an Uber straight to the hospital. The drive is long and I am exhausted, but I need to see Romeo, I need to know this wasn't all just a bad dream or bad media. I hope for my own heart's sake that he really

meant it when he said he loved me. I just can't handle another disappointment, not from Romeo. After all this time, I came home for him and all I can do is pray that he is okay.

CHAPTER 34

LILLY'S POV:

"*The disappearance of 24-year-old Romeo Kale has just been broadcasted all the way from South Africa. The kidnapping has come to light today, Aug. 15, 2009, but it is now brought to our attention that he has been missing for three months. Footage was released of when Romeo Kale was kidnapped and he had to ask his father for the ransom. Watch this heart-breaking video with us now, live for the first time.*"

"Dad,

As you can see, I am alive. The people who took me want money, your money. They need you to deliver the money, alone, no cops! Follow their instructions and they won't hurt me. Here are the details.

"Lilly if you see this, I want you to know, I never left you and I love you."

On the flight home, the interview plays over and over in my head. He said he never left me, all I could think about is if I fought a little harder or asked him to stay with me instead of taking Amy home, he would be safe, but I know that his taking Amy home was the right thing to do at that time. She was having his baby. If he never left me and says he loves me, does that mean he wants to be with me? Could I be the stepmum? Could I deal with her calling him because the baby needs something, and be okay with it? If he has to leave me to rush over there, I

don't know how I'd react; I am not a selfish person and I know that the baby is innocent in all of this, but this is a complicated situation.

I get to the hospital, and I stand there just wondering If I am doing the right thing. What if Amy is here, would it be weird? I know I will definitely wait to tell him about our baby girl. This is not the time, all that is important now is Romeo's health. I find myself at reception and I ask for his room. I use the elevator and I still have all my luggage with me. Right now, I just need to see Romeo. I walk towards his room, and I see Uncle Edward, Miles, Dillan, and Derek. Dillan sees me first and smiles.

Dillan: "I was wondering when you'd show."

Lilly: **"**Hi D," we hug, and I greet Miles and his dad, and they tell me that Romeo is asleep, as in knocked out. They managed to speak to him for a few minutes and his doctors say he will be just fine. He has had his operation already and they are waiting for him to wake up, and then recovery is the next step. He has to bed rest for six weeks. Uncle Edward tells me that Aunty Lisa passed on peacefully in her sleep about two days ago. Romeo doesn't know yet; everyone is emotional, and they aren't ready for this. It's one thing after the other. I look through the open door and I see his body, he is just lying there, and I cry from relief.

I walk inside and I sit on the side of his bed and hold his hand and I don't need to say anything right now, I just hold his hand and cry.

Derek: "Lilly, I'm sorry, can we talk for a minute?"

Lilly: I hear Derek's voice and I wipe my tears and agree. I know this is Romeo's best friend, but we have never really spoken much. We walk away from everyone to the waiting room, and it's empty.

Derek: "There is something you need to know. I am sorry because I know this is a really difficult time for you, but I think it's better you know before he wakes up."

Lilly: "What's going on? You're scaring me."

Derek: "I don't know how to tell you this so it would be easier to just play this for you; listen."

Lilly: "What is this?" He takes out his phone, goes into some app and presses play.

Derek: "Amy, this is Derek."

Amy: "This is not a great time."

Derek: "Actually I think you need to hear me out. I found the condom you hid from Romeo."

Amy: "I don't care right now, Derek."

Derek: "Well, I am going to tell Romeo because he is under the impression you guys never used one."

Amy: "So what, Derek? So, what if I faked my pregnancy? It probably doesn't matter anymore."

Lilly: I am shocked. She hung up after that and Derek fills me in on his theory. Apparently, this was expected from Amy because she always pulled tricks on Romeo so he would take her back. I am just sitting there stunned. "Does Romeo know?"

Derek: "Nope, but I am going to tell him, and I just wanted you to know that he really loves you, Lilly, and now nothing is standing in your way. The two of you can be together now and I know he is always messed up, but I know how much he has always loved you. Please, this may be selfish, but after everything he has been through, just go easy on him."

Lilly: "Thank you for telling me, Derek." He gets up and leaves me and when I go back to the room everyone is inside with Romeo and he is awake. His dad is apologising, his brothers are crying, and I feel like I am intruding, but then he sees me. Everyone follows his eyes, and they see me, and I am just standing in the doorway. I don't know what my next move is so I just stand there when Dillan says everyone should give us a minute.

Romeo's POV:

I remember watching my dad from the van, he did exactly as they asked, five million rand at 3am; he has the money inside a red duffle bag and puts the bag into the trash can, but before I can see anything else they throw me out on the corner, grab the money and drive off. That's all I know. I know I hit my head hard when they threw me out of the van, it was very painful. I woke up in hospital with my brothers lying on me and crying. My dad has apologised a thousand times, but I am just happy to see my family. I am even happy to see Miles. The doctor comes in and tells them they have ten more minutes, then he needs to take me into surgery to repair my hip and my leg. I didn't even know I had broken my leg; how? I wonder. Everything is blurry and they are asking me so many questions, but I haven't answered one. The police were there, and reporters, it's like a madhouse. My dad requests that I be transferred because the privacy at this hospital sucks, but I barely whisper *no*! I tell him that this is my last known location as I heard on the news, and Lilly might try to find me. And then I don't remember what follows.

I open my eyes and I am in a different hospital; I get so angry that a pain shoots up my leg, into my rib, straight to my head and all at once my whole family is by my bedside. I see my dad, Miles, Dillan and Derek.

Dad: "It is all over now, my son."

Miles: "Good to have you back, Bro."

Dillan: "Shit, man, you scared us."

Romeo: "Why are you always crying, Dillan? Damn, I am fine! Where's Mum?"

Dad: "You need to take it easy, there is a long recovery process ahead."

Romeo: "Dad, why did you move me after I asked you not to? How will Lilly find me now? You really need to start listening to me, I am an adult, and I am tired of singing the same song."

Dad: "Calm down, Son, Dillan texted Lilly and she knows where you are. That hospital wasn't too private, and it was a mess. I was worried about who knew you were there, so we moved you. Right now, we just need you to recover and come home."

Romeo: "Please stop crying, I am not dead. Where's Mum?"

I look up when I see a shadow in the door and I half expect a nurse or doctor but it's her, it's Lilly. She looks shattered and I know how much I have put this woman through, but I really need her by my side right now. We are just staring at each other when Dillan tells everyone they should give us a minute. He is great, that was a good move. I try to lift my hand slowly to indicate to her that I want her to come to me and she comes in slowly. She starts crying and for a few minutes she sits next to me and holds my hand, then she buries her head in my bed and cries.

After a few minutes Lilly goes into the private bathroom and freshens up. My family come in and say goodnight; they haven't slept, eaten or bathed in days, and they need to rest. I ask my dad where my mum is and tell him to stop worrying, all in one go. I met the Smiths and they won't be back, and I tell my brothers to shower and get some sleep, they look like shit. "Hey, Miles, while you're at it, please shave!" They laugh and tell me I should be the last one to talk. I probably look like shit too. When Lilly comes back, I see her for the first time and she has lost weight; she looks exhausted. I see her luggage and I am confused. The nurse comes in and says she needs to give me my medication, but she will grant us a few more minutes because my dad asked her to. I don't want Lilly to go, she just got here.

Romeo: "Nurse, can't she stay with me? Please?"
Nurse: "She could but there would be no point, your medication is so strong you wouldn't even know she is here, and besides, she looks tired too."
Lilly: "Could I come early in the morning?"
Nurse: "Definitely. I will give you a minute to say goodnight."

With that the nurse leaves us and Lilly sends a text, I'm not sure who to, maybe it's to Josh. We have so much shit to do and talk about. I wish she didn't have to go but the nurse is right, I don't want to be selfish right now, Lilly needs to rest too.

Lilly's POV:

After crying my heart out for no particular reason, I go to the bathroom to try to compose myself, and when I return, the Kales have left and Romeo is just looking at me. He has a purple ring around one eye, his bottom lip is torn, and one cheek is red and swollen. There is a bandage around his head so I can't see the injuries and he had an operation this morning to repair his ribs. His leg is broken and in a cast. His beard is long and his hair too, and he looks like he is in a lot of pain. He looks at my luggage and frowns. The nurse comes in and interrupts us and I need to leave soon but we haven't even spoken yet.

Romeo: "Nurse, can't she stay with me? Please?"

Nurse: "She could but there would be no point, your medication is so strong you wouldn't even know she is here and besides, she looks tired too."

Lilly: "Could I come early in the morning?" I ask the nurse because Romeo needs to rest, and I need to shower.

Nurse: "Definitely. I will give you a minute to say goodnight."

With that the nurse leaves us and I send a message to my dad to please fetch me from the hospital. I walk over to Romeo and sit down for the few minutes we have. I know I have so much to tell him - he doesn't know about our baby, Amy's baby, his mum, or Josh.

Lilly: "You need to rest; I promise I will be here as early as I can."

Romeo: "Okay, thank you for coming by today."

Lilly: "Where else would I be?" My dad texts that he is downstairs waiting.

Romeo: "I'll see you tomorrow."

Lilly: "My dad just got here. Yes, you will see me tomorrow." I stand up and put my hand on his shoulder; this is awkward, do I kiss him, hug him? I end up smiling and just walking away.

Romeo: "Goodnight, Angel." She stops at the door and smiles.

Lilly: "Goodnight, Romeo."

I get home and I show my mum and dad all the pictures I took. We spend an hour having coffee and I give them rough details about my vacation, and we talk about Aunty Lisa's funeral, which will be this Saturday. Then I fill them in on Romeo, and when we're done, I am so exhausted I could pass out. "I'm going to shower and sleep. Goodnight, Mum and Dad, and thank you for the holiday." That night I sleep, wake up, toss and turn, sleep, wake up and toss and turn, and in the morning, I am even more tired. I get up, take another shower, and go downstairs for coffee. My mum is always up bright and early, so I find her making breakfast for herself and my dad. I ask my mum how Marsha is, I haven't seen her in forever. "That's because your sister has a boyfriend," she tells me. I almost fall off my chair. "Did you just say Marsha has a boyfriend?" My mum tells me that she found a message on my sister's phone from a boy named Hunter and it read, 'I want a hug tomorrow for all the trouble you're causing me. Sleep sweet, Baby.' We end up laughing and gossiping about this because it is strange and weird - she is only thirteen, and my mum comments, "well, you met Romeo when you were nine, so why judge her?" I take my travel mug, cellphone and keys and say, "I am going to Romeo," and my mum laughs even louder.

I get to the hospital, and I know I said I'd wait for him to text me, but I couldn't sleep so I decided to come and wait. The night nurse sees me, and she tells me he had a good night and that he is still asleep, but she put a comfy chair in his room and I can sit and wait for him to waken. She also informs me that their shift change is coming up, but she already told her colleague that I will be here. How presumptuous to assume I'd be here all day! Okay, yes, that was my plan, but still. I walk into his room and he is sleeping very peacefully. I walk over to him and have a closer look at him. I really try to be quiet, so I sit down and take out my book and continue reading. I love reading books, romance is my thing. I fall asleep and the sound of his dad's voice wakes me. He smiles when he sees me and asks how long I have been here.

Later, around eleven, the nurse says she needs to give him his meds, but we don't need to leave. She injects something into his drip, and he opens his eyes immediately.

Lilly: "Nurse, what did you give him?"

Romeo: "Shit! Feels like ice going through my veins!"

Lilly: The nurse is speaking about medication, but I leave her to entertain his dad, and I go to Romeo, "Good morning, Sleepyhead, how do you wake up swearing?"

Romeo: "Good morning, Beautiful, how long have you been here?"

Lilly: "Since around eight this morning. Are you hungry?"

Romeo: "Yeah, I'm starving."

Lilly: "Okay, I'll give you and your dad some space and I'll go warm up your breakfast." I walk out of the room with the plate of cold food in my hand and I ask the nurse to warm his food, and she tells me lunch is about to be served, then asks if she should bring both breakfast and lunch or dispose of his breakfast and just serve him lunch. Whoever has seen Romeo eat would agree with me: "Please will you bring both."

When I go back to the room, Romeo is crying!

CHAPTER 35

LILLY'S POV:

Romeo is swearing and he doesn't want his food. His dad shakes his head, and they talk for a few minutes, so I excuse myself and wait outside. I'm assuming his dad just told him about his mum and this is not going to be easy for him. After what feels like forever, Uncle Edward walks out and tells me he told Romeo about his mum and that he is asking for me. His dad says he will be back this afternoon as he still needs to make some arrangements for the funeral. When he walks away and leaves, my heart breaks, he looks so sad and exhausted. I walk back into Romeo's room and he is just staring out of the window.

Lilly: "You okay?"

Romeo: "I'm sorry, Lilly. My dad just gave me some bad news."

Lilly: "About your mum?"

Romeo: He doesn't answer me; he takes out his phone and presses play, and I hear the familiar recording:

Derek: "Amy, this is Derek."

Amy: "This is not a great time."

Derek: "Actually I think you need to hear me out. I found the condom you hid from Romeo."

Amy: "I don't care right now, Derek."

Derek: "Well, I am going to tell Romeo because he's under the impression you guys never used one."

Amy: "So what, Derek? So what if I faked my pregnancy? It probably doesn't matter anymore."

Lilly: "I am sorry, Romeo." Do I admit I knew? What is the right thing to do here? This couldn't be why he was crying.

Romeo: He looks up to me and smiles, "Lilly, are you really sorry?"

Lilly: "Yes, Romeo; you said your dad gave you bad news. Those were your words, so because it hurt you, I am sorry. I am so sorry about your mum too."

Romeo: "I am shocked that Derek didn't tell me, but my dad said my mum wanted to tell me, but she didn't get the chance to, so he did it more for her than for me. He didn't really like Amy; my mum maybe liked her, I don't know, I was never sure. Her parents extorted money from my family while I was kidnapped and now Jake and Amy have run away together. I am angry that I let Amy play me for a fool, yet again. I never learn." I need to stop crying.

Lilly: I let him cry his heart out, he needs to mourn his mum. Suddenly I ask, "Who is Jake?"

Romeo: "Really, after everything I've just told you, you ask me who Jake is?

Lilly: "Excuse me, Discussion Police, but I can't hold a conversation if I don't know who we are talking about, so who is Jake?" He laughs out loud.

Romeo: "Jake is my dad's lawyer; he is young but much older than me. I think he is thirty. He is tall and skinny; you must have seen him before." I love this woman so much.

Lilly: "Romeo, I knew." I couldn't hold it in anymore; there are too many secrets between us, and I am the one holding all of them away from him.

Romeo: "Knew what?"

Lilly: "Derek told me last night about Amy and he played the recording for me. I didn't know all the time; I have also just found out and it sounded more like he was asking me to go easy on you and give you another chance."

Romeo: "Oh, was he now?"

Lilly: "Like I said, I just found out and I didn't want you to think or find out I knew and accuse me of keeping things from you."

Romeo: "It's okay, Lilly, I am relieved in a way because I wasn't ready to be a father. I mean, I will always step up and accept my responsibility, but Amy just wasn't the one."

Lilly: "So no more Amy?" I can't hide my smile and he laughs. We spend the day just talking about random things because I think Amy's news and his mum's passing were enough for one day. Every five hours nurses come in and check on him. Evening comes and it is time for me to go again and I don't want to leave, but I do. I stick to the rules because Romeo has a long stay, and I don't want to cause any more trouble. So, I leave the hospital and when I get home, I am exhausted.

1 WEEK LATER

Romeo is being discharged today and I am so happy, he was restless and kept nagging to go home, upsetting the nurses, and refusing to eat the hospital's food. His dad asked their housekeeper to have his bedroom and bathroom prepared and cleaned, and now he is upset about that too. He claims everything was in a certain place and he hopes they left his things the way he likes them to be, which I doubt. I am picking him up, and when I get there, he is sitting all packed and ready to go, crutches and all.

I laugh because the doctor just told us he would be discharged but he hasn't actually discharged him yet.

Lilly: "What if the doctor changes his mind?"

Romeo: "Don't mess with me. Can he do that?"

Lilly: "Yes." I can't hide my smile anymore and he doesn't really find my taunting funny.

Romeo: "Lilly, stop making silly jokes, please go ask them if we can leave?"

Lilly: "Are you nuts? You want them to shout at me?"

Romeo: "Come on, please? They already don't like me."
Lilly: I shake my head and fold my arms across my chest. "Nope."

Just then a nurse walks in, greets only me, and hands me the discharge form and his medication. She finally looks at him and points her finger at him, "Rest, you hear me? Rest for five weeks." As she leaves the room, she whispers - but not really trying to hide what she says - "because we don't want you back here anytime soon." Romeo rolls his eyes and I giggle.

As soon as we get home, Romeo flops on the couch and everyone is faffing over him. He pretends to hate the attention, but he loves it, I know him. His dad made him his favourite meal and we are all sitting down for lunch when he just starts digging in.

Uncle Edward: "Romeo, please say grace."

He looks up with a mouth full of food and we all laugh at him. Dillan takes pity on him, and he prays, so we tuck in. The steak rolls are amazing and even I want more. I haven't had a decent meal since Rio. We enjoy the meal and after lunch I help him up to his bedroom.

Romeo's POV:

I am lying on my bed watching a soccer game, and Lilly has disappeared, leaving me alone. I hear some banter and arguing; I think it's Dillan and Miles in conflict. They come blasting into my bedroom, still shouting, and they ask me to intervene.

Romeo: "What the hell is going on, why are the two of you shouting?"
Dillan: "Rome, please settle this, you will definitely be able to help. What makes you a Casanova?"
Romeo: I don't know whether to laugh or cry, so I opt for laughing. "Are you guys really arguing about this?" Dillan starts whispering.

Dillan: "Come on, dude, Miles claims he's been with seven women. I said that's nothing, I've been with three, and he says it takes five women to make you are a ladies' man, which can't be true."

Romeo: "You guys are idiots, get out of my room."

Miles: "Maybe Romeo here doesn't know because he's only been with one woman; I mean as far as I know it's only been Amy, right?"

Romeo: "That, my dear foreign brother, is none of your business."

Dillan: "Rome, tell him, tell him, come on. I know it's more, like twelve, right?"

Romeo: "What are you really asking me?" I lean back on the bed, raise my eyebrows, and put my hands behind my head. I wait and they look at each other. This is hilarious. You would think their lives depended on knowing.

Miles: "Okay, Romeo, how many women have you been with, sexually?"

Romeo: I feel like I'm fifteen again. "You keep this to yourselves and never repeat this again." I warn them. "Once I answer, you leave my bedroom quietly, and I want no follow-up questions."

Dillan: "Understood."

Miles: "Understood."

Romeo: "Twenty-seven."

LILLY'S POV:

I am in the Kale's home, and I am busy making dinner. This is one thing I enjoy doing, I am a fabulous cook. The music is playing, and we are having red wine. The guys are shooting pool and stubborn Romeo has been up and down on his crutches. Why do women always have to do the domestic stuff, while the men have fun? I am preparing tenderloin steak with a cherry sauce, roast potatoes, and asparagus with a garden salad; it smells delicious. Romeo comes hopping into the kitchen and kisses my neck. I get such a huge fright, like, what he is doing? "You're the best thing in my life, I am so in love with you, and I will win you back from Josh," he whispers in my ear, and tears spring to my eyes. Dillan and Miles bolt into the kitchen and yell for Romeo to come and watch them shoot pool.

Miles: "Romeo, for the twenty-seventh time, we must have called you twenty-seven times to come and watch us shoot pool. Didn't you hear us?"

Romeo follows them out, punching Miles in the back and making him stumble, and I hear Romeo saying, "You called me twenty-seven times, huh Miles? Watch it!" All three of them start laughing, and I wonder what that's about.

Aften lunch I help Romeo up to his room. I help him down on the bed and tell him we need to talk.

Lilly: "We need to talk."
Romeo: "Oh no, what did I do wrong?"
Lilly: "Nothing, there's just something I haven't told you." I take a deep breath and it's very difficult to get the words out.
Romeo: "Listen, if Josh has a problem with you helping me out and taking care of me, I will understand. I don't want to disrupt your life, Lilly. I will wait for you."
Lilly: That's it, I can't take hearing his name any longer, and I start crying, confusing the shit out of Romeo. He just stares at me.
Romeo: "I'm sorry Lilly, shit, did I say something wrong? What's going on?"
Lilly: "Romeo, Josh died a few months ago." I blurt it out, and now I am really crying, I mean full-on crying.
Romeo: "Oh my God, I am such an arsehole. Come here."
Lilly: I don't say anything else; I just lie there in Romeo's arms.

Light fills the room, teasing me from my sleep; I stretch out and open my eyes. I have a headache from all the crying. Beside me Romeo is still asleep, and I take this opportunity to study him. Wow, he is handsome, but he really needs to shave. I get out of bed and head downstairs where I find my mum talking to Uncle Edward about the funeral on Saturday, and when she sees me, she stamps her foot.

"Couldn't you have told me, Lilly? This is so irresponsible. I was worried sick!" she scolds. Although she knows I am here every day, I still apologise. I shake my

head and leave her and Uncle Edward to talk, and I bump into my dad in the kitchen. I smile and ask him what he is doing, and he just shrugs his shoulders. I make them some coffee and now I am the favourite daughter again. Coffee fixes everything.

CHAPTER 36

Theo: *I tell my grandmother that I will stay on the phone with her until my parents get there. This cannot be happening. I realise that I need to get to Mozambique. My family owns all the businesses in our small town, and I don't like it. I get to the airline, and everything is arranged. Once at the airport I am escorted by security and greeted by the pilot. We take off, and I am sad - I have left my new life behind, my friends, my job and, SHIT! TESSA……..I sit up in a panic, I didn't even get a chance to say goodbye. Tears roll down my face and I realise how much I am about to lose. What a day!*

Tessa's POV:

It was raining outside, and the temperature dropped. Holding a warm cup of coffee, I snuggled with a blanket on my sofa and turned on the entertainment channel. When I left the party tonight, Theo was nowhere to be seen. I don't know why I was looking for him, but this disappearing act was mean. Did he run off with another woman, hours after being with me? It just doesn't sound like him.

Two weeks later

Theo hasn't been to work; his phone is off, and I am worried. I involved HR because maybe something has happened to him, but no one knows where he is, not even his work bestie Mike, who said he last saw Theo the night of the party. I've had enough. I take my bag and my cellphone and go to Theo's house. If I find him, I swear he had better have a damn good reason for this stunt.

When I get to his place, I knock and knock and peek through the window, but nothing. This is so strange. Maybe I should call the cops. There is a little girl playing outside and I take my chances.

Tessa: "Hey, little girl, excuse me."

Little girl: "Yes, Aunty?"

Tessa: Oh hell, no, do I look that old? … "Do you know the man who lives here?"

Little girl: "Yes, Uncle Theo."

Tessa: "Yes, have you seen him lately?"

Little girl: "Yes, Aunty, but he hasn't been home in a few days."

Tessa: "Thank you." This is too strange. Maybe I should alert the police? Suddenly my phone rings; I don't recognise the number.

Tessa: "Good afternoon, this is Tessa speaking."

Theo: "Hi!"

Tessa: "Theo, is that you?"

Theo: "Yes, Tessa, it's me. Are you okay? How are you?"

Tessa: "Are you fucking crazy? Where are you? Where have you been?"

Theo: "I am in Mozambique."

Tessa: "What!"

Theo: "I can explain."

Tessa: "I don't have time for silly jokes, Theo."

Theo: "Tessa, on the night of the Christmas party, my grandfather died, and I had to come home. Things have been quite hectic, so I haven't had a chance to call you. Please understand. I'm not coming back, Tessa. I called to apologise and tell you that I will never forget you, but you will probably never see me again."

Tessa: "Theo, what? Wait, I am so confused." The phone goes dead, and I am confounded. Did I hear him correctly? Did he say Mozambique? Did he just say he was never coming back? I sit flat on the grass in front of his home; how could this be?

William's POV:

I was once broken-hearted and destroyed when Nisha, the mother of my child, cheated on me and didn't want to be with me. I last heard from Nisha's parents that she had moved to Amsterdam with her new husband, and it broke my heart that she didn't even come to say goodbye to her son, but her parents say she pretends Ty doesn't exist. Her new husband doesn't even know about him, and they now have a child of their own. I then fell in love with my old flame Lee. I smile because she hates it when I used the word 'flame', she claims it is very old fashioned.

I sit and think about Lee. She was ten years old when she first showed up at our house. I didn't even look at her because she was my sister's friend, but it didn't take me long to figure out she liked me, and she soon had a major crush. She was thirteen when I realised I really liked her, so when she came over, I started winking at her when we greeted and smiling more often than I should have. The day of my sister's birthday, Lee wore a pink dress and yellow sandals and a yellow sunhat, and I thought she looked silly, and this made me laugh to myself. She walked past my room then she stopped, and I closed my eyes and pretended to be asleep. She came into my room, and she just stood there; I could hear her breathing. I opened my eyes and she looked embarrassed. I couldn't resist, I smiled and pulled her hand, and she landed perfectly on my lap, and I kissed her. She put her hands on the back of my head and it wasn't like teenagers kissing, this was really intimate. I recall our conversation.

Lee: "What was that about?"

Will: "I couldn't resist any longer. What were you doing in my room anyway?"

Lee: "I don't know, honestly! I just found myself in here."

Will: "Well, I am glad. Are you okay with what just happened?"

Lee: "Yes, I am."

Will: "Great!"

And then we kissed again, but Tessa's footsteps scared us, and I remember spanking Lee lightly before she left my room. When she came out in her pink bikini, I was horny as hell and I went over to her, took her hand, and said, "Come swim with me." It was the best day of my life. I liked her, really liked her. Lilly decided she wanted a sleepover; I was overjoyed. I walked Lee home that night because she hadn't packed a sleepover bag. We walked in the dark down our driveway, and before we reached our gate, I kissed her hard. That night I made sure I slept next to her. The next day I remember asking her to be my girlfriend and she said yes.

Tonight, years later, she is sitting across the table from me, and she looks breathtakingly gorgeous. She has a long black dress on, and we are on our monthly dinner date, and we have been together for more than a year now and I am going to propose.

LEE'S POV:

This evening Will looks so handsome - he is wearing a suit, a white shirt and a white bow tie. I love this man and I am suspecting that he wants to propose tonight.

Thinking back to before Will and I got back together, I had made a list of the qualities I wanted in a guy several times and wondered if such a guy even existed.

One night a year ago when I visit my parents, my dad and I have an argument and I take a walk and see Will's car parked outside. He is sitting in the car. He has turned off his engine and the lights, and I find him crying. I knock on the window and ask him if he is okay. William gets out and opens my door, and just

stands there smiling at me. I get in, and we sit in the car for a few minutes, then spend hours in my little cottage and just have a great chat, a great laugh, and the best sex ever. I remember our conversation and how brave I was, and that was the night I remembered that good guys do exist. The memory plays in my head:

Lee: "Are you just going to stare at me all night or are we going to 'catch up'?" How are you and Nisha, and, oh man, how is Ty? Lilly sent me pictures of him, he is so beautiful."

William: "Thank you, Lee, he is great, I couldn't have asked for a better son. As for myself and Nisha, it's over, technically it ended tonight."

Lee: "I'm so sorry, Will."

William: "It's okay. Fill me in on your life, how are the studies going and is there a new boyfriend?"

Lee: "There was, but that also ended, like, two days ago, and that's why I'm here - I ran. So, you want to have a drink with me? I'll make my parents some tea, and evidently, they converted my bedroom into a library, so I am sleeping outside in the cottage. I have a bottle of whisky there."

William: "Lee, that would be great."

Lee: "Go park your car and you can just walk over; I'll meet you out at the back."

I remember almost running home, making my parents' tea, and then rushing to the back yard to go to the cottage and make sure everything is tidy. I hear the small gate opening and I know he is almost here, so I quickly run to my room and freshen up, and then he knocks at the door. He makes a fire in the grate, and I pour drinks; I am so horny and ready to be with him after all these years. We end up drunk, and it is the best night ever. Will practically peels off my dress and kisses me like no one has ever kissed me before; I touch my lips at the memory as the waiter pours our wine.

In a year I had three breakups, I was devastated. I got a part-time job in an Indian boutique to distract myself and keep myself occupied. It worked, as I would look at the beautiful clothes and jewellery and imagine wearing them to

my wedding. I would even try them on when there was no one around. I would go to a website for weddings and admire the beautiful pictures and wonder what it felt like to get married like a princess, surrounded by beautiful flowers and in an exotic location.

Another thing that I did was to make a general list of my intentions and look at it every night before I went to sleep and every morning after I woke up, and I'd feel happy. I used to affirm every day that 'My life is filled with magic and miracles!' My mom suggested that I come home, and I agreed, it was time for a fresh start. Will really was the perfect gentleman and treated me with kindness and respect. I was on cloud nine, kindness was the first quality on my list. Everything after that night happened super-fast and now, we are here. I have waited for this moment my whole life.

Our favourite song starts playing and he asks me to dance. After we dance, we sit down and eat, and I am disappointed, the night is almost over, and he hasn't asked me yet. We go home and I am now sad, and soon my sadness turns into anger. We drive home quietly, and I want to explode but I keep cool, and we get to his place. I get out first, bang the door because that's what we women do when we're angry, and march up the stairs - and I mean march. I open the door and switch on the lights and walk in and everyone screams SURPRISE! I almost die.

Everyone who is important is there: my parents, Will's parents, my brothers, Tessa and Troy, Lilly and Romeo – shame, he still has crutches – and Will's younger sister Marsha. My grandmother and Will's grandfather and Millicent, John, and Wesley Jnr (their son) are all there; these people have played a big role in my life and Will's. I turn around because yes, I am surprised, but what is the surprise for? I find Will behind me on his knee, and he says:

"Lee, I have spent my teenage years lusting after you, but I want to spend my adult years loving you. Will you spend your life with me and we can grow old together?" I say yes. Everything is perfect.

Our parents agree, they talk to each other, and Will asks my father for his blessing, and we get engaged. He gets along with my family and impresses them. We set the wedding date for a month after my engagement.

We have a beautiful outdoor wedding in his business partner's huge back yard flanked by a lake. We also hire a talented photographer who takes amazing pictures, and guess what? Our pictures are posted on several wedding websites!

Also, my husband has all the qualities I had wanted in my ideal guy and many more!

CHAPTER 37

William's POV:

We are on our honeymoon, and we had wanted a honeymoon true to the spirit of our lifestyle - an eccentric honeymoon. Lee took a six-month retreat from her job hunt, I left my position as an engineer because I found a great company that could offer me more, we put our belongings in storage, and set off to enjoy our honeymoon.

We travel through five countries, eating, drinking, making new friends. Just before we have to go back to reality, we decide on one more country. I am missing Ty, but I think, *what is a few more days?* Lee fancies London, I want Asia. I feel uneasy about London, but I go against my instincts. I want to give my wife everything she has ever wanted.

We travel to London and are pestered to go on boat rides, which don't particularly appeal, but we end up taking one at the last minute, opting for a Roamer three-day experience. We thought we'd regret it if we didn't. It is a three-day trip on a very big Uber Roamer, and it even has places to sleep. We want to see London's famous sites from a top cruise on the river Thames. The captain is ill, so the trip is being run by his young buddy. We have an amazing time; I don't have any doubts that we will remember our honeymoon forever. On the first night, as we are sleeping on deck, moored next to the riverbank, a freak storm blows up. The boat is quickly deluged. The captain tells us to get below deck to shelter.

Soon the river is a little calmer as the rain abates a little, and Lee and I make the most of our time below deck. She lies in my arms, and we cuddle and talk about our future. She wants children - many children -and I am so ready to give them to her. She is a great mother to Ty, and he is totally accepting of her. Often when we get home from work, he chooses her over me. He eats with her, she potty trains him, and at night when he is afraid, has a nightmare or just wants an adult's comfort, he calls for her. Lee cried the day Ty called her Mummy; I still tease her about it.

I sit up and tie her hands to the headboard of our bed. She starts wiggling and squealing from excitement and I can't hide my laughter. I want to take off her shoes, but she kicks them off, making me laugh, and she is going to ruin this moment if she doesn't stop. I take off her dress and she is lying there with no bra on - WHAT THE HELL, Lee? No bra? The whole day already? She giggles. I am shouting and she's giggling. I bite her nipples and suck to make a love bite, then I kiss her nipples again and tug on each one.

The giggling has stopped, and her breathing has picked up. I take off my pants and get on top of her. Her eyes are closed, and I have my finger inside her, she is so ready for me. You know what the best part about this is? No condom, skin to skin. I remove my finger and she says, "Please, more." I repeat the process and I am sitting on my knees and watching myself make my wife happy, and it arouses me too. I watch my fingers go in and out and in and circle. I repeat, in and out and in and circle until I can't take this anymore. I remove my fingers and thump inside her, and I feel her tighten, she climaxes immediately. I pound on and on and I feel that her muscles haven't relaxed; surely she isn't still climaxing? This is great. I finally let go and we both fall on the bed, exhausted.

She says she has a surprise for me, and she jumps out of bed and heads towards her bag. She gives me a long thin box, when I open it, it's a pregnancy test – reading positive. I am totally overjoyed and emotional. I hug her, and we are so happy; the rain is pouring outside, and she sits me down and tells me she was pregnant before our wedding and wanted to keep it a secret until she knew it was safe. She also tells me the doctor saw two heartbeats and it seems we're having

twins; I am crying like a little girl, I am so overjoyed. I can't wait for Ty to have siblings.

Rapidly, the boat rocks again, the weather picks up and we try hard to get up and get dressed; I steady myself against the walls of the room and hold Lee's hand and now even I am a little scared. I go back up and tell Lee to wait for me, and the captain shouts for me to go back down. It doesn't feel like the right thing to do, leaving him alone up there – it makes more sense to get ashore and try to help him – but I do as he says, what do I know about boats after all? Minutes later the boat overturns and starts sinking, and I lose Lee - I can't find her in all that water, and I panic.

We are trapped in the pitch-black cabin, which rapidly fills with water. I don't know what happens next, but I fall over, calling for Lee, trying to see where she's gone to, and I feel how I fractured my skull when the boat capsized – but I now realise why they say drowning is a peaceful way to go. I do remember thinking, very calmly: "There is no air. My lungs are full of water." Where is Lee? I hope she is okay. I must have lost consciousness, because the next thing I know, I am afloat on the surface of the river.

Lee isn't there. I keep desperately hoping she is stuck in an air pocket or that someone has already rescued her. For several hours, I refuse to leave the spot where the boat has gone down; what if she comes back? We gather on the sand as we wait for help, and authorities come and start searching the area, and her body is recovered a few hours later. There is no embassy in the nearest town, and a power cut means I can't access the internet or a phone. Everything we own is on the boat, so I have no money or passport. No one will help me. I am crying and confused, yet I try to keep calm and get help. Eventually I get onto a cruise ship and call my dad at 4.30am his time. In shock, he contacts the embassy.

After a two-day red-tape nightmare with the authorities, I return to South Africa, on my own. I left my country a married man and now I return home, alone. It feels like I have been torn in half. Initially I focus on Lee's funeral. Her parents are shattered. I play the song we had during our wedding ceremony over and over. Nothing makes sense, this isn't fair. I don't know how to look her father in

the eye. I promised to take care of his daughter and now look what happened. How do I tell Ty? He keeps asking for her, and on top of all of it, everyone has so many questions: What happened? Where were you when it happened? Where was Lee when it happened?

The days and weeks afterwards are almost unbearable. I leave Ty with my parents because I just can't be a father right now. There are many times I wished I'd drowned too. Our belongings are still in boxes piled up in one room. I can't bear to unpack them. The shock and trauma make me lose my short-term memory and I have to write everything down. I am permanently exhausted – nobody tells you how tiring grieving is. Sleeping is difficult, and when I do fall asleep, I wake thinking Lee is still beside me. Friends and family help me survive, day by day. Getting a rescue dog makes a huge difference too – Barney Bear is a big, lovable thing, exactly the sort of dog Lee and I would have chosen together. Ty loves him.

A milestone is moving back home and Ty moving back home too. For the first time I feel it is possible to do something on my own, that I am able to exist without Lee. I am still grieving – for Lee and for my future; a future that had included her. I can't go back to how I was before – I am a different person now. I decide to move myself and Ty away from all the memories and we move to Cape Town. Lee loved it here so maybe we will too. I get a live-in nanny and I know we will be okay, and I have come to understand that the richness of our life together has given me the resilience to make it on my own. I will be a great dad to Ty, and it will forever be just the two of us, BATMAN AND ROBIN.

CHAPTER 38

Dillan and Selena

Dillan and Selena met when he was about nineteen years old. They had many other relationships - flings, but nothing serious -, and when they met, they discovered true love. But will they end up together, are they meant to be?

Dillan's POV: (1 year ago)

It's a very hot Friday night and a girl has invited me to a party. I call up the guys and they have already left, saying they will meet me there. I decide to Uber because I know we will be drinking, and I don't want to cause my parents any more headaches than Miles and Romeo are doing now. My brother Romeo hasn't been home in two months, he always does the disappearing act. Apparently, he is with a girl named Faith now. Poor Lilly. I am convinced he thinks he is a magician. Romeo is stiff and uptight and boring. I love my brothers, but they are arseholes, no simple way of putting it. Romeo is a playboy, our very own Casanova. I always say Romeo is my best friend, until he tells on me, then he is just my brother. I put on my linen button-down shirt and my blue jeans. I want to be comfortable, but I need to look my best; you never know who you might bump into.

I get the Uber and when I get to the party most of my friends and the other people are wasted, drunk out of their minds. The music is loud and most of the women are underdressed and even more wasted than the guys. People are screaming and others are in the pool. I grab a drink and look for my buddies; this isn't really my scene, so I head home early and decide to hit the sack because I want to visit a new church tomorrow.

The next day I walk to church because it's not that far, and when I get to the chapel, I see there is a small coffee shop, a big stage and over a hundred chairs. There is a Sunday School room and a room for babies. A man who I assume is the pastor comes up to me and tells me that they only start in a few minutes, and I can make myself comfortable. I decide to get a coffee while I wait, and that's when I see her and that's how we met. I know from that moment on that she is mine. She walks up to the counter and asks me what I want. I almost say *YOU,* but I don't. Close call though.

I order a coffee, and while she's making it, I watch her. She is very short - very, very short, or maybe I'm just tall, but I look at her again, and nope, she's short all right. Oh Lord, I look down and she's wearing heels. What the hell? Didn't her mum give her Scott's emulsion? She has a nice arse though, damn! She turns around and smiles, hands me my coffee, and I pay. When I sit down, I watch as people come in and exchange pleasantries; everyone is friendly, and I feel at home. I know that that is where I want to attend church and I don't know if it's the great coffee, the friendly people or a short, sexy mama that persuades me of that decision.

We fall in love instantly, and after the service, I ask her on a date. We go on a couple of dates and my favourite is our movie night. I am alone; Miles, the other problem child who showed up out of nowhere and took our lives by storm, has something else on. He is a gentleman, he's great, but he's always competing with someone, mostly Romeo. Selena picks me up and we go to the movies. We watch a romcom (not that I expected to watch anything else) and afterwards we go to her house, park her car in the dark driveway and we start getting freaky.

We are lying on the back seat, and I haven't even met her parents yet. It's so dark and quiet out here. I am still looking around when she sits on me and I put my hands on her backside and we make out. This is great, but I feel, feel around, move my hands up and down, and I can't feel any panty lines. I raise my eyebrows and in between kisses I tell her that this is very distracting, referring to her semi naked state.

She's not even listening to me. She unbuttons my shirt, and she is kissing my neck, and if she doesn't stop, I will not be held liable for what happens next. I put my hands under her dress, and I've hit the jackpot. She is naked and ready for me, and her hips starts moving in a seductive rhythm, pushing against my hand. She unzips my pants, and my erection is set free; she places her hands around my good friend, and I lie my head back on the back seat of her car and she moves her hands up and down. Her fingers tighten and I close my eyes, and suddenly I feel her lips around me. "Jesus, that feels good," I groan. My eyes are open, and I am watching her. She pulls me even deeper into her mouth and I feel I hit the back of her throat, "Selena, I am going to come," I warn, "please stop." I warn again but she is relentless. I let go and I come, and she still hasn't stopped, and when I finish, she sits up and smiles like she has just won a gold medal.

I flip her over and lie her on the back seat and now I put my knee between her legs, and I start to kiss her neck and move my way down. I move down to her belly, and I am waiting to feel pubic hair but there's nothing. I look down and she is clean, soft like a baby, and it stands out; it's something I have never seen before. My God, this is the best night of my life. We have sex and I have never had sex like this before and we both explode in orgasms and suddenly we both become aware of a voice outside.

It takes a minute, and I am still inside her and I sit up and I see a man and she says, "Shit, my dad!"

"Selena?" he starts calling, and I am dressing as fast as I can. "Selena?" he calls again, and he comes walking towards the car. She grabs my shirt, and she grits her teeth, and she almost threatens me but all she says is "Run!" with big wide eyes.

I feel like a coward, and I don't want to cause her any trouble, so I crawl out of the door and as soon as my feet hit the ground properly, I run as fast as I can, and I hear her dad shouting that he will find me and he will kill me. "Okay, Liam Neeson," I think to myself.

When I am far enough, I call my brother and he answers. I check the time and it's 3am, I knew he'd be awake.

Romeo: "Hey, man, you okay? What's up?"

Dillan: "Hey, sorry, let me catch my breath."

Romeo: "Is everyone okay at home? You are making me worry." Romeo has always been our 'stand-in parent.'

Dillan: "No, chill man, everyone is good. I have just been running."

Romeo: "Why the fuck are you running at 3am?"

Dillan: "Yo! Rome, I met someone!" He starts laughing and asks me again why I am running. I tell him that her dad caught us doing the dirty in her car.

Romeo: "So why are you calling me, D?"

Dillan: "I needed to tell someone about this chick, I knew you'd be up. I heard Lilly called you and you're coming home? Is that true?" He is still laughing at me, but I don't care.

Romeo: "Yeah, I was just about to shower and leave."

Dillan: I slow down now and start walking to catch my breath. "Cool, so I'll see you tomorrow?" I am so glad he is leaving Faith. I don't know her, but I don't like her.

Romeo: "Yes but tell me about this girl."

Dillan: "Selena, her name is Selena. Oh man, I can't wait for you to meet her."

Romeo: "Damn, Bro, you're whipped."

Dillan: "I am going to make her my wife, Bro, this is the one."

Romeo: "You've known her for three days, D. Don't be stupid."

Dillan: "When you know, you know."

Romeo: "Yeah, whatever; then what happened?"

Dillan: "I thought you didn't wanna hear my story?"

Romeo: "Whatever, man, I want to know what happens next. How did you end up speaking to her?"

Dillan: "Just after I finished my coffee, I wanted to throw away the cup, but something caught my eye." I pause because I know this will annoy him, and I am smiling, waiting for him to shout at me, and on cue he curses.

Romeo: "For fuck's sake, Dillan, what caught your damn eye?"

Dillan: "She wrote her name and phone number on the side of my cup."

Romeo: "And you didn't see it the whole time you were drinking the damn coffee?"

Dillan: "No, man, I was watching the people."

Romeo: "I'll see you tomorrow, loser."

Dillan: I get home after an amazing day with Selena, and I am smiling from ear to ear. I go up to my bedroom and I see Miles isn't home yet. It's kinda late, and he doesn't really know anyone here, and he is never out if he's not with me, so maybe I should call him. I dial his number while taking off my shoes but there's no answer. I'll take a shower, and if he's not home by the time I finish, I think I'll have to go look for him. I am really worried now. My phone beeps and I see a message pop up on the screen, it's from Miles. "Hey, Bro, I'm with Lilly, don't wait up."

My heart sinks; shit. Romeo is going to kill him, dammit! I might just kill Miles myself. He knows how Romeo feels about Lilly, what is he thinking? I put my shoes back on, grab my jacket and grab the spare keys, but then I stop dead in my tracks. Why is my phone ringing? Oh, maybe smart arse decided to call me back. I am struggling to retrieve my phone from my pocket; fucking skinny jeans! Shit, I missed the call; when I eventually get my phone, I see it was Romeo. This guy must be psychic. When I check my messages, there are two, one from Romeo and one that I sent to…..oh no! I accidently forwarded Miles's message to Romeo. I call Romeo back immediately. Jeez, what a shit show. He answers on the first ring.

Dillan: "Romeo, let me explain."

Romeo: "What the HELL are you doing with Lilly, man?"

Dillan: "What? No, that message was from Miles." shit, obviously it doesn't show who it is from, it's just forwarded from me to him, but I didn't want him to know it was Miles. Why did I say that?

Romeo: "OKAY, WHY THE HELL IS MILES WITH LILLY?"

Dillan: "Don't yell at me Bro, I was just going to find out. You weren't supposed to see the message."

Romeo: "Dillan, you know you're making the situation worse, right? Why am I not supposed to see the message? What is going on? I swear to God if you and Miles are playing me, I am going to kick some serious arse."

Dillan: "Calm down! Miles is with Lilly, but I am on my way over there; I will call you back."

Romeo: "Dillan, call me when you get to Lilly's place, I want to know why he is with her."

Dillan: "Okay, I am on my way."

CHAPTER 39

Dillan's POV: (1 year later)

A year later and Selena and I are still together. I met her parents, but her dad doesn't know that, that was me in the car that night and he will never know. Selena and I swore we would be buried with that secret. I am so in love; nothing even makes sense anymore. Selena will be here soon and then we are having dinner with my dad. She walks in but she looks really annoyed and I ask her what's wrong, but she keeps saying nothing, and now I'm annoyed. "Your lips are hanging on the floor, clearly this isn't nothing!"

Selena: "Just don't shout at me, please!"

Dillan: "Why are you shouting now?" we are getting nowhere.

Selena: "My boss's brother has been following me around all day, asking me to go out on a date with him."

Dillan: "The fuck not!" The words I just said make no sense, but I am so angry that is all I could manage to choke out.

Selena: "It's no big deal, I said no."

Dillan: "Saying no and saying, 'I have a boyfriend' are two very different things to say, Selena."

Selena: "I need to shave my legs, my underarms, and I need to shower and wash my hair."

Dillan: "What does that have to do with what we are discussing?"

Selena: "I am tired and annoyed; this is my point. Leave me alone."

Dillan: She bangs the door and I hear the shower turn on. What the hell just happened? I walk downstairs and I don't even know if I am angry anymore, I know I am confused, - yes, definitely confused.

I go downstairs and I wonder where my dad is. I go back up and I can hear his shower going, so both my dad and Selena are late. I slump onto the couch feeling miserable.

We go to the restaurant an hour later and we are all quiet, there couldn't have been a more terrible time to consider my dad's loneliness and take him out for supper, and suddenly I realise I am on a date with my dad, so I burst out laughing and they are looking at me like I've lost my marbles. I share my thoughts and now they are both laughing, and we end up having a good time.

6 WEEKS LATER

LILLY'S POV

Romeo is doing well and today I am taking him for his check-up. I walk into the Kale's house like I live here because I have spent so much time here that it feels like home. Romeo is ready and waiting for me and his dad nags to tag along but Romeo says he is a grown man, and he can do this on his own. Soon we are in the car and on our way. We chat for a few minutes like normal friends do, and his phone rings.

Romeo: "Romeo speaking, good afternoon, that sounds good." There is a pause as he is listening to what the person has to say. "I am much better; I will just let my doctor clear me for travel."

TRAVEL? I scream in my head, where is he going to *now?*

Romeo's POV

I remember the conversation so clearly; I even remember my thoughts when I got the call six months ago.

> *I work for a well-established law firm, and I have been saving to start my own practice. My dad could have given me the money a long time ago and man, did he offer, but I want this to happen on my own merits. Everything is in place, and this is the last phone call to give me all my approvals, or they can deny me. I want to be successful, and I do like money, who doesn't? Lilly is used to having a good life, she is spoilt and has never lacked anything. If I want her in my life, I have to be able to provide for her. She might not even need my money, she is hard working and I know she will give me the speech of having her own money, and this thought makes me smile. I am a man, and this is my responsibility. I take the call and my day has been made, I have been approved, my building is ready and waiting and I even have staff waiting to be employed. There is one catch, I need to go abroad to another country for two weeks. The Chief Judge has been holding this favour over my head for many years and he is finally calling it in. If I do this, I will be the Managing Partner of my own law firm. I have worked my ass off for this and it would be so stupid to give it up now – but, Lilly! I need to speak to her; two weeks is a long time.*

The Chief Judge had called me back and he still needs me to go to Germany for two weeks to convince and collect divorce papers from his third ex-wife. She is a pyscho and he often has to fight his way out when they are in the same room; she has locked doors on him and begged him not to leave her, so he doesn't want to see her. He tells me that all my paperwork is in order, and he has approved the buying of my property, my licence and my CIPC documents. Everything is registered and all he needs to do is hand them to me and I will be the owner of my own law firm. I am listening to him, but my thoughts are with Lilly. She is sitting beside me, and I know she is wondering about the travelling part of this conversation. After losing Josh, I know she needs me and I don't want to leave

her again and find when I come back that she is with someone else. These men are waiting like a pack of wolves for Lilly to be alone.

Lilly drops me at the door of the hospital, and I am still on the phone while she looks for parking. I use this time to try and get a better deal. I tell the Chief that the deal has changed because it's more of a risk now, and an inconvenience, and I will need two tickets to Germany and a bigger room. He laughs and says yes, he will pay for my fuck-buddy, and I just laugh it off. We end the call and now I just need to convince Lilly to go with me. I really don't want to leave her here, but we are just friends. She doesn't owe me anything and this is a big ask, and frankly it is just weird. I want to make things permanent with us.

The doctor removes my casts and does all the checks and clears me for normal life again. I have spent two hours with him, and he gives me all the documents I need, and I pay and leave. I walk out of his office, no crutches and a free man, and it feels great. I find Lilly in the waiting room, and I didn't think she would wait for me, but she smiles when she sees me and I know that this woman must love me, she just has to. She is so beautiful and caring and I want to spend the rest of my life with Lilly, but I am also afraid that I have ruined all the chances she's given me. I walk towards her, and I think it is time to make a move and have the biggest conversation of my life. I am tired of being just Lilly's friend. I want more.

Lilly: "Well, don't you look like a spring chicken!"

Romeo: "I have no idea what that means, Lilly, but if you mean I look great, then yes, you are correct." We both laugh and walk towards the exit sign.

Lilly: "I don't remember where I parked."

Romeo: "What?"

Lilly: "I've lost the car."

Romeo: "How do you lose a whole car? We will find it; what can you remember?"

Lilly: "I parked next to a white BMW."

Romeo: "REALLY!" Lilly is so forgetful; you'd swear she was a hundred years old and not almost nineteen. We walk around for

twenty minutes, and Lilly is laughing because we finally find the car next to a white Mercedes, nowhere near a BMW. In her defence, the BMW could've left, and the Mercedes could've taken the parking, but I know Lilly very well; this car has been here all the time and she really thought it was a BMW.

Lilly: "I am sorry that we lost the car."

Romeo: "WE?" I half shout. She starts giggling again and I am amused, and I love that she's happy. Only Lilly could mess with my emotions like this.

Lilly: "Stop being such a grandfather; I found the car now, so everything is fine."

Romeo: "*YOU! YOU* found the car?" Now she is really laughing, we have surpassed the giggle, this is full on laughter, and I don't get it. "Lilly, why are you laughing?"

Lilly: "You are repeating everything I am saying, that makes it funny."

Romeo: She finally stops laughing but I am smiling like a racehorse. "Are you hungry?"

Lilly: "I could eat."

Romeo: "Lunch?"

Lilly: "Sure. Where would you like to go?"

Romeo: "You're such a bossy driver. We can go to Dolly's; they have great burgers."

We pull up at the Dolly's pub and this is probably my favourite place to eat. I usually come here alone. This is the first time someone is accompanying me and with good reason - you see, Dolly's has the biggest burgers in town. They are messy to eat but so damn delicious. Lilly says she's never been here before and I am glad because it's more of a guy's hangout: there is a pool table, bar, and some chairs and tables. Nothing fancy but I think she will like their food and wine. We sit down at the bar and Lilly takes off her jacket, and yip, just as I imagined, all the guys are staring. She is oblivious as she sits down and hangs her jacket over her bar stool.

Romeo: "Don't you want to go sit at a table?"

Lilly: "No, the bar is good."

Romeo: "Okay, what do you want to drink?" I am looking at the wines and maybe a cocktail but Lilly shocks me by ordering a Jameson whisky, a banana-flavoured milkshake, and the bacon with blue cheese and guacamole burger with fries. She looks at the menu likes she's not done, and I can't help but laugh. I shake my head and place my order and now we are just sitting and talking. I love her company. She is so sincere and funny and vibrant.

Lilly's POV

Romeo and I spent the whole afternoon at the bar, shooting pool, eating, and just talking. I know in my heart of hearts that I am in love with this man, and when we decide to leave the bar, he offers to drive, and I take the moment to really look at him. He has dark black hair, cut to perfection, his eyes are round, big, and deep, and they are brown. His lips are my favourite feature: they look so juicy, and they do a good job of kissing me too. I blush at the thought. He is tall, well-built and I love his hands. He has some beard, a straight nose, and I love his shoulders and his amazing arse. I want to be with Romeo and I wish he would kiss me, but he takes me straight home, walks me to the door and drives away. I start crying for some apparent reason and I end up just feeling silly.

I walk into the house, and I see my best friend Tessa, I haven't seen her in months. Tessa is sitting at the dining table when I walk in. Her smile fades when she sees me. "Lilly, what's wrong? You've been crying" Tessa loves stating the obvious. "Oh no, have you been with Romeo again?" I sit down and tell her all about lunch and how great the day was but that he didn't even try to kiss me or make a move, and I don't know why but this makes me sad. "Lilly, you know Romeo loves you." She gently rubs my arm. "Maybe not anymore, Tessa." An hour later we are sitting with wine, and I have ordered supper for us. The house is empty, so we talk as loudly as we want to, and scream, laugh and cry. I have missed her so much. She tells me that she and Zane have ended their engagement and relationship and she tells me about Theo, and I almost die, it sounds like the best romcom ever. We chat for another hour and when she says she needs to go home, I want to cry again. This has been so much fun, I don't want her to go.

We walk to the door and bid each other goodnight and promise not to wait so long to see each other again. I wave as she drives away, and I see car lights and I wonder who this is. Security lets the car in and as it approaches, I see it is Romeo's car. I hope everything is okay. He gets out and starts talking while he walks towards me, "Lilly, there is something about you, I have tried to behave today and respect your space, but I can't stay away from you." I am just standing there. He finally gets closer to me and he is standing right in front of me. "Lilly, what are you doing for the rest of your life?"

CHAPTER 40

"Lilly, what are you doing for the rest of your life?"

Romeo's POV

"I mean, will you spend the rest of your life with me?"

No wait, Lilly I am not trying to scare you. I just want you to know that, that… uhm….

"Shit."

Should I tell her? What if she rejects me? She hasn't said anything yet.

"Lilly, you don't know this, but with our first relationship, we fell asleep, and you were only fifteen years old."

I am mumbling. Why did I start this conversation? She is waiting for me to finish and I am fucking this up.

"So, when my dad picked me up, I kissed your forehead, and I told you I loved you for the first time." There…...I said it.

"Lilly, I loved you then and I love you now, it has never changed. When I said those words for the first time in my life, I knew I would never say them to anyone else but you, and that day I promised to never say those words unless I really meant them and I was ready. I love you, Lilly."

Shit, why is she crying, is that a good thing or a bad thing?

LILLY'S POV

I start crying because he doesn't even know about our daughter, I am crying because he doesn't know about Miles, I am crying because he doesn't know I heard him that day, when he told me that he loved me, and I am crying because I love him so much, but I am scared he is going to hurt me again. "Romeo, we need to talk."

Romeo: "Damn, the famous rejection words."

Lilly: I can't help but laugh "No, Silly. Come inside." We sit down and I am nervous.

Romeo: "Lilly, if you don't feel the same way about me anymore, I will completely understand."

Lilly: "Romeo, I love you, I have always loved you, but if I am going to give you another chance, we need rules, boundaries and new promises that you have to keep."

Romeo: "I will do anything."

Lilly: "Okay, let me finish. Promise Number One: You need a new phone number; all your rats have this number, and I don't want to deal with you getting phone calls from them."

Romeo: "Did you just call my ex-girlfriends' rats?"

Lilly: He is laughing so loud I actually feel embarrassed. I just narrow my eyes.

Romeo: "Okay, sorry yes, agreed. I will get a new number."

Lilly: "No, Romeo, I mean now. Give me your sim card." He takes out his phone, removes the sim card and watches me intently. I

take the card and start chewing on it. That sends him over the edge, he is holding his tummy and cracking himself up so bad.

Romeo: "Are you crazy?"

Lilly: I get up and get a lighter and take the sim card out of my mouth. There isn't enough damage to the card, so I light it and burn it and Romeo is having a great time, he thinks this is a comedy show.

Romeo: "Jeez, Lilly, what else are you going to do to the card?"

Lilly: "Nothing else. I'm done. Promise Number Two: No more lies. Even if you think it is going to break my heart, you need to always be honest with me."

Romeo: "Agreed."

Lilly: "Last promise, you need to tell me you love me every single day."

He lunges at me. "I promise, Lilly." That's all I hear and then we are full on making out. I open my lips slightly giving him access to my tongue. He takes full advantage and I love being kissed by this man. We are kissing and taking off our clothes in swift movements and everything is happening so fast I don't even realise we are halfway to my bedroom. We reach my bedroom, and we are on my bed in record time.

We are lying on the bed, naked, and I am so ready. He leans down and kisses me, his tongue mirroring the actions of his fingers inside me, possessing me. I am lost, my eyes are shut tight, I whimper. This is so sexy. I open my eyes and he is sitting over me, just staring at me, and I blush. What the hell is he looking at? I want to cover my breasts, should I hide? What the hell is he doing? Then he slowly enters me, and I am so unaware and taken by surprise that I come instantly, shutting my eyes again and enjoying the fullness of him. He continues and I am sated, relaxed, but he hasn't had enough. The pleasure I felt a minute ago now feels like exhaustion, but he is not done, he doesn't stop. Then, I'm building again, and I open my eyes in shock.

His eyes are closed, and he looks happy and excited; the look of enjoyment on his face sends me over the edge and I come, and he comes - we climax together,

and the feeling is exquisite. Our breathing is hard and loud. I lie panting on the bed, and he gets up and walks to my bathroom. He is so confident. I am watching him walk away, staring at his arse, when he looks back and catches me watching him. I blush and pull a blanket over my head. When he disappears into the bathroom, I get up and use the moment to get dressed before he comes back. I straighten the bed and now I am patiently waiting as he emerges from the bathroom. He exits and I enter to freshen up.

When I enter the bedroom, we look at each other and we are both lost for words. I start to say something but then stop, so now we are like two idiots, wondering what to do next… "Lilly," he interrupts my thoughts. "Yes, Romeo?" I look at him. "Come sit down next to me." He pats the bed. I sit down and he continues, "What do I have to do to deserve another chance with you? You made me promise those things and I swear on my life I will keep the promises, but you said there were rules?" I look down at my hands and he cups my chin, "What's wrong? You can talk to me." I start crying again, I am a mess around Romeo. "Romeo, we have dated six times, it has never worked but it wasn't always your fault. There's something I need to tell you."

I love him so much, but I am scared he is going to hurt me again.

Lilly: "The day you told me you loved me; I heard you and pretended to be asleep." I blurt this out, because - of the three secrets I have - this is the easiest one.

Romeo's POV

I sit down next to her, take her hand, and kiss it because no matter what secrets Lilly has, I will wait for her to tell me and I will forgive her, but for now something more important needs to be discussed.

Romeo: "Lilly, there is one last thing." She rolls her eyes and flops on the bed.

Lilly: "Oh God!"

Romeo: "I want to open my own practice, my own law firm. It took me years to try to convince the Chief Judge that I may be young, but I am ready and I have some money saved up, but he needs to approve my licence and help me join his network. He called me back and he said he will do what is needed but he also needs me to go to Germany for two weeks to convince and collect divorce papers from his third ex-wife. She is a pyscho and he often has to fight his way out when they are in the same room. She has locked doors on him and begged him not to leave her, so he doesn't want to see her."

Lilly: "That's great news, Romeo, congratulations." What does this have to do with me?

Romeo: "Lilly, I will be gone for two weeks."

Lilly: "Oh." A sudden attack of sadness overwhelms me, and I don't know if I want to cry or act brave but neither of them seems to be achievable now. I just sit there.

Romeo: "Angel, come with me?"

Lilly: "What?"

Romeo: "Come with me?"

Lilly: "I can't!"

Romeo: "Why not?"

Lilly: "Because, Romeo, I have an interview here this week for a job on campus. I have a life here."

Romeo: "Lilly, we're not eloping."

Lilly: "I know, but..."

Romeo: "Think of it as a vacation."

Lilly: "Romeo, I will be here when you get back."

Romeo: "When is your interview?"

Lilly: "Monday morning."

Romeo: "Okay, we can leave after it?"

Lilly: "Let me think about it, okay?"

Romeo: "Fine!" I get so angry and even I don't understand why I am this angry, but I grab my jacket, kiss her on her cheek and walk out. I can't be around Lilly right now. Why doesn't she want to come

with me? Is she hiding something? Maybe she has someone, and she doesn't know how to tell me. Why didn't she want to take me back? I slam the front door and basically stomp to my car like a five-year-old. I was really looking forward to spending some time alone with her.

On my drive home, I have calmed down and I think of calling her, but I don't want to fight and if I know Lilly as well as I say I do, I know she is super-mad right now. I get home, park my car and I sit for a minute. I need a place of my own. I look at my parents' house and I have outgrown it. I decide to start house hunting online tonight. I text Lilly. I know she will either ignore me or flip me off, but I let her know I am home. I am walking up the stairs when my phone buzzes and I smile, yip, there is the middle finger emoji, just as expected.

CHAPTER 41

Romeo's POV

I found three apartments online that I really like but I want Lilly to go with me, and just like that, I need her approval for everything I do in my life. The next morning reality hits me and I remember Lilly is angry, and I need her today. I lie in bed and think of some way to make her smile and forgive me, so I text her.

Romeo: "Good morning, Beautiful, where are you?" and all she responds is, "With Mum." I knew she would be evasive; she is not going to go easy on me. I decide to call her mum.

Romeo: "Hi, Aunty Kate, It's Romeo."

Aunty Kate: "Hi, Son, how are you?"

Romeo: This woman is smart; I breathe a breath of relief; thank God she didn't say my name. "I would like to surprise Lilly; may I ask where you guys are?"

Kate: "I suspected as much; we are shopping, and she is in the fitting room at the moment, so I am alone."

Romeo: We chat for a few more minutes and I know where they are, and I am on my way. My spirits are up, I am singing along to the music in the car. I am driving along Palm Boulevard when a store catches my eye. I slam on the brakes, almost causing the car behind me to hit me, but I turn just in time. The guy flipped me off but that's okay, I am in too much of a good mood to

let anything spoil my day. I walk into the store and straight to the window. A saleslady walks up to me and asks me if she can help me. I point to the window and show her what I want. She smiles and asks me who the lucky lady is. I smile because I am the lucky one. "This monster right here is for the love of my life." She smiles, and I carry the biggest teddy bear I have ever seen in my life to the car. This thing is as tall as I am and seems to weigh almost as much. I sit him in the back seat and drive to meet Lilly and her mum.

Lilly's POV

I get a text from Romeo, "Good morning, Beautiful, where are you?" and I roll my eyes, because he knows I am mad at him right now, so I respond, "With Mum." My mum and I are out shopping and because I've lost so much weight, I buy a few pairs of jeans and some dresses. When I emerge from the dressing room, my mum is on her phone, so I go and look for some underwear. My mum and I end up just walking and talking, when I see Romeo. What the hell? My mum smiles and tells me to go, my dad is also on his way to have lunch with her. What is wrong with these men? Romeo charms my mum and kisses me on the cheek. We walk hand-in-hand out of the mall and I get excited, my anger forgotten. "Where are we going?" I ask him. "I need your approval on something," he tells me as he opens my door. I get in the car and wait for him to get into the driver's seat. He slides in next to me and smiles. "I need you to meet someone first," he says. I must look confused because he immediately looks to the back seat and I didn't even know someone was in the car with us, but when my eyes follow his, I see the biggest, most cuddlesome teddy bear that I have ever seen in my whole life. Tears spring to my eyes; I jump to the backseat to sit next to it - it's huge! Wow! It's white with red ears and it's holding a big red heart that reads *I love you*.

"Romeo, is this for me?" I manage to ask him. "Of course, it's for you, Lilly, do you like him?" He looks worried. "it's a boy?" I ask, laughing, and he nods his

head yes. “So, can I name him?” I can’t hide my smile. “Of course, you can. Let’s go,” he says, and I jump back over to the front seat.

We drive for a few minutes, and he stops at a block of apartments and turns to face me. He wants me to look at apartments? I am so confused. “Lilly, I want to get a place of my own, and I want you to look at a few places with me, is that okay?” Wow, this is big! I try to smile but I am feeling nervous, why? I am getting ahead of myself. We spend the day going from place to place and by the end of the day I am exhausted, but I think Romeo found the one he was looking for. It is a modern apartment with an open floor plan, it has large windows, wide openings between rooms, and lots of lighting. The dining room and kitchen are connected, and it is fully furnished, which is great. There is also a fireplace, a massive television set and stairs that lead to the bedrooms. The passage is long and there is a bathroom and two bedrooms upstairs: the main bedroom and a spare. The main bedroom is huge and has a walk-in closet, a bathroom with a couch, and a small study with a work desk. I think it is cute and Romeo says he will make the offer tomorrow.

We are driving home just after dark when I receive a text from my mum saying that Marsha is at a sleepover and that my mum and dad are spending the weekend at a game reserve. My parents are like teenagers, they are always going out and act like they haven’t been married for almost twenty-three years. There are also instructions, and I smile as I read them. My mother always jots them down in point form because she says if she just writes them in paragraph form, I get bored and won’t read it.

- Make sure to lock up.
- No parties, and Romeo can’t stay over, I will know.
- Eat three meals.
- Check in with security at least twice a day.

You would swear I was twelve years old. I laugh as I read it aloud to Romeo.

Romeo's POV

Lilly is reading me a list of rules or instructions that her mum texted her but all I heard was that she was home alone this weekend. She smiles her shy smile, and she puts her hand on my thigh as we drive to her home. I grab her hand as I don't want to go off the road; I kiss her hand and bite her small finger and she giggles. I want to get us home safely and keep her in this mood.

We reach her house; she opens the door and soon we are all over each other. I kiss her neck and grab her juicy arse and we are kissing like we haven't seen each other in months. We are kissing all the way to her bedroom, and I think I hear a sound, but I am so desperate to be inside Lilly, I can't think of anything else. I kick her bedroom door open, and we are ripping off our clothes as we move to the bed. We find ourselves naked and Lilly surprises me when she starts kissing my neck, chest and stomach; I am shocked and excited all at once, is this really going to happen? She starts licking and teasing and this feels amazing. I move off her and turn her around when suddenly she stops and tells me she feels sick. She runs to the bathroom, and I don't see or hear anything. I check on her and she tells me to go home, but how can I leave her like this?

Lilly comes back to bed and before she falls asleep, she basically kicks me out. On my way to my car, I see Aunty Lisa and Uncle Wes, but they don't see me. They must have decided not to go. I silently thank God Lilly and I weren't caught.

CHAPTER 42

(Kate and Wesley - Lilly's parents)

Kate's POV:

I am sitting in my bedroom when a note is slid under the bedroom door. I stand up, somewhat confused, and retrieve it. I smile when I read it. Wesley and I have been married for twenty-three years and although that feels like a lifetime, I am still madly in love with this man. My husband is a very hardworking and successful man. He has done everything he could do to provide for us, and when we were younger, I never thought we would have this much and be this blessed. The note reads, "Snowy, I love you."

He has always been the romantic one, the soft one and the more experienced one. I met this man when I was a teenager, and I didn't think we would ever get married, but we did, and we had three beautiful children together. I get in the bath, where my water has been waiting for me, and I just lie there. I need some time to myself.

My thoughts drift to Lilly. She is so young and so infatuated with Romeo, it scares me. She has her nineteenth birthday coming up, but she begged us not to have a party, she rather wants the money. She is so spoilt and wants for nothing but still wants the money. It surprised me, I must say. I honestly would like the two of them to end up together and I hope Romeo can take care of my daughter, he sure has hurt her enough.

My thoughts go next to William, my son. I miss him so very much. I speak to him once a week and he is settled in Cape Town with Little Ty and their nanny. I am glad he decided to get a nanny, raising a young child is not for the faint-hearted. When we spoke last week, he told me he still misses Lee so much, but he has found a job, they have a home, and the nanny and Ty are safe and happy.

My dear Marsha is still in school, but my word, she is a handful, even if I must say so myself. Okay, she isn't half the trouble Lilly was or is, but she is a more difficult child, and I wonder if she doesn't need professional help. I am almost certain she has a personality disorder. I can just never get to know her; she is all over the place. She certainly loves attention; she is always cuddling up to me and trying to have conversations that make no sense. I try to listen, but she is a bookworm and nothing interesting happens in her life. Although, if there is one thing that she is exceptional at, it is that she is the most helpful child among my three. She always helps me prepare dinner or helps me get ready when I need to leave. She is always around, lending a helping hand, God bless her heart. I do hope she is kindly rewarded someday.

My house is high up in a river valley, surrounded by hills and trees. On clear fall nights, while I take a bath, I get a full view of the stars. It is a magic little place, not quite a wilderness, but a good place to relax. When I die, maybe a bit of the magic will be there for someone else to enjoy. I hope the children keep the house in the family so my grandchildren can enjoy it and love it the way I do. I am lying in the bath, soaking, when I hear a loud bang. It scares me so much that I splash the water. "Wes? Is anyone there?" There is no answer. I wonder what that was. I get out of the tub, put on my gown and slippers, and as I reach the bottom of the stairs, I see that the kitchen door is damaged. I look around in a panic and I see that everything is scattered, and then I hear faint footsteps.

I hear their voices and it hits me like a lightning bolt - there are intruders in my house. I slowly step back and try to not make a sound. I take the stairs one by one, and I thank God Marsha isn't home. I make it back to my bedroom and I find my phone. I dial the security first, then the cops. I go into the bathroom and lock myself inside and I start to full-on cry. Where is Wes? Did they kill him? I suddenly get a burst of bravery. I text Lilly and tell her to contact who

she can and to not come home. I know Marsha is sleeping at her cousins', so she won't be home either. I get up, wipe my tears, and walk to the door. Inside my bedroom I find my black takkies and tracksuit. I dress as fast as I can. I go to the safe and get Wes's gun. Did they think they were going to come in here and hurt my husband? I do all the safety checks, just like he taught me, and I slowly make my way to the door. As I get closer and closer, I hear them coming up the stairs and at this point the loss of possessions doesn't matter; I have given away much more than their value, what mattered is being reduced to an object of prey in the one place I imagine as my refuge from attackers - my home - and all I want is to get to Wes.

I blast through my doorway and make sure that I can see who I am pointing my firearm at, and I start shooting and screaming. The two scumbags fall over each other and roll down our stairs. I make sure to shoot just above them so that I don't kill anyone, I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I did. I almost run to the top of the staircase, and I watch as they get up and run towards the back door. At that moment I hear Wes calling and we run to each other like never before. We hug and kiss and I feel numb. Then I start to hear sirens, and again, I get the realisation that we have security. What happened to John?

"Who was on duty, Wes?" He looks at me and it's a whisper but also a cry; he says, "John".

The police arrive and they start the search for our security guard, and some are looking for fingerprints. Two more policemen are taking pictures and the detective is asking us questions and tells Wes he needs to see the camera footage and his gun. Everything is happening in slow motion and suddenly Romeo comes running in, "Aunty Kate, Uncle Wes, where's Lilly? What happened?" I look at Wes wide-eyed and then back to Romeo… "We thought she was with you?"

Uncle Wes: "Romeo, she said she was going out with you!"
Romeo: "Yes, Uncle Wes, but she felt sick, so I brought her home and I even walked her in, to her bedroom. She was in the house."

They both look towards the stairs and they start running, but I start running in the opposite direction. I know my daughter all too well. When she isn't feeling well, she goes to the library to get a good book. I open the door in a panic, and I see her small body lying on the ground and there is blood everywhere. My heart is in actual pain, I can't believe my eyes, and for a minute, it seems as if I had woken up from a nightmare and now, I fell asleep again and the nightmare continues. I scream and cry, and the police and Wes come into the library, and the next thing I know, the ambulance have loaded her into the van and assured me she is alive but in a critical condition.

We spend hours at the hospital before the doctor tells us she has been stabbed and lost a lot of blood. The knife hit her liver and they have managed to locate the hole and close it so the internal bleeding has been dealt with, now all we can do is wait and see how Lilly fights to recover. Once I hear this, I know all will be okay, my Lilly is a fighter. The hospital staff send us home because she is only allowed one visitor and Romeo insists he stay.

My next phone call is to Millicent, she is John's wife and deserves to know what happened. Within the hour, she is there with my godson Wesley Junior. He is sound asleep, and she is in a state of shock. The police have been searching the property and we don't know anything yet, so what do I tell this woman? All I manage to do is hug her, and we cry together. After a few minutes - which feel like hours -someone's radio goes off and we hear is, "Sir, we've found something." I stand up, but Wes tells me to stay here with Millicent and Wes Jnr. He follows the detective and only then do I look around and I see the burglars have thrown over the bookcase. I don't know why but I feel like they will be back. They now know the inside of my house and the rest of its contents. To keep things in perspective, I remind myself that robbery and pillage are the rule in history, not the exception. Robbers are almost always young; only the young have the energy for this lifestyle, or the stupidity to find it appealing. Their most common victims are the weak, the disabled, the solitary, and the old.

The men return and Wes can't look at me and I know something is wrong. I stand to my feet, but I can't seem to make them move. "What's happened? What did you find?" Wes finally lifts his head and looks to Millicent and chokes out,

"They found John's body." There is a loud scream as she falls to her knees… "NO! NOOOOO!" she screams, and I sit down beside her, and Wes shakes his head and leaves the room. There is nothing we can do, nothing we can say, tonight we lost a good man: a friend, a husband, a father! This nightmare just won't end.

CHAPTER 43

Romeo's POV

Lilly is home, doing well. She really put up a fight. I moved into my own place, and I might end up going to Germany alone. She is sitting on the couch, and she can't move much yet, but all is well, and I am glad. She is in my home; she visits me often and I am a happy man at the moment. She can't cook because of her leg but we are hungry, and she doesn't want me to order in, so I offer to cook - Lord help us both. She is sitting on the sofa, and she keeps peeking to see if I'm coping. I can see she is worried, and honestly, I am worried too.

Lilly's POV

Romeo and I have been dating again for two months now and things are absolutely perfect. I am worried because he offered to cook, and he is wearing my cartoon-printed apron and frankly he just looks foolish. I leave some of my things here; I honestly do forget them. He is much taller than I am, so that means the apron looks small on his body. He has been in the kitchen for a long time and I am starting to feel anxious, so I lift myself off the sofa and limp to him. "Romeo, I am starving!" I pull my face and make a baby voice. Romeo looks back and frowns, "Lilly, please go and sit down," he demands, but I stay rooted. Then suddenly he scoops down and picks me up. "You should be resting, why are you so stubborn?" I kiss the corner of his mouth, and it takes him by surprise, but he smiles, and I know he likes it.

An hour later we are eating, and the food is really delicious, wow. I am amazed and impressed.

Lilly: "I thought you didn't know how to cook?"

Romeo: "What makes you say that?" I try and act like I didn't call Millicent for tips.

Lilly: "Most guys can't cook."

Romeo: "That's a very gender-based accusation; I can do anything - literally, anything."

Lilly: **"**Oh my Lord, you are so full of yourself!"

Romeo: "Well, try me!"

Lilly: "What do you mean?"

Romeo: "Okay, so, I can cook, clean, do laundry, I can bake, I can do anything electrical, I can do woodwork, I can make things, build things, I can dance, I can fu…. sorry. Yes, anything, there is very little I can't do."

Lilly: Did this guy really want to tell me he was good in bed? I lift my eyebrows at him. I know him well. I know he can do all these things. "Time will tell, I guess." That's about all I could squeeze out after the bedroom highlight; now my mouth is dry and for some odd reason I am breathing more heavily than I should. He is very confident about himself and all his abilities. I roll my eyes, more at my own thoughts than at him, and I am rewarded with his smile again.

Romeo: "Lilly, I am leaving for Germany in two days." I blurt it out because I don't know what to do. I don't want to go without her, and I know she will be mad.

Lilly: "What?" I am practically screaming.

I am shocked and anxious. When Romeo leaves, he normally leaves for weeks on end and there is normally another woman involved. I thought we were done with this pattern. I need to get used to him leaving and travelling for work, but so soon?

Romeo: "I have told you about this trip, Lilly, I asked you to go with me, remember?"

Lilly: "Romeo, I am in no condition to travel."

Romeo: "I know, but I need to do this for my boss in order to get my papers."

Lilly: "Why are you letting him blackmail you?"

Romeo: "He is not blackmailing me, Lilly, we had a deal and I need to keep my end of the bargain."

Lilly: "I don't want to argue, just go. Hopefully this time you will come home." I blurt out.

Romeo: "That was below the belt, Lilly. I've changed."

Lilly: "We'll see about that," I choke out. I am so angry right now.

Romeo: "Why are you so negative about us? We have been doing so well." I am shouting now because she always thinks the worst of me. I mean, I have changed; she needs to learn to trust me. I have made mistakes, but I am trying to be better.

Lilly: "Because, Romeo, when you leave you always seem to meet someone and forget about me. I have to protect myself; I can't get my heart broken again. You show up after months, beg me for another chance and we repeat the process, over and over and over." I'm on a roll and I'm not thinking, I'm shouting, and my blood is boiling I am so angry. "You never once said you're sorry, not one apology, ever. Not one of the many times you've broken my heart, not when you left me and cheated on me, not when we lost our daughter…" He looks at me and I realise what I just said. I stop mid argument. My breathing is heavy, tears are streaming down my cheeks, and I just blurted that out without thinking because yes, I am hurt. Hurt that he never apologised, not once, but I didn't want him to find out this way.

Romeo: "What did you just say?"

Lilly: I keep my head down, my fingers are knotted together. Why didn't I think before I spoke? It's too late now, the truth is out. I can't bear to do this now; I don't think I have ever processed our baby's death. I haven't dealt with it, so I don't know how to tell him, where to start. What do I say?

Romeo: "LILLY! WHAT DAUGHTER?"

THE END